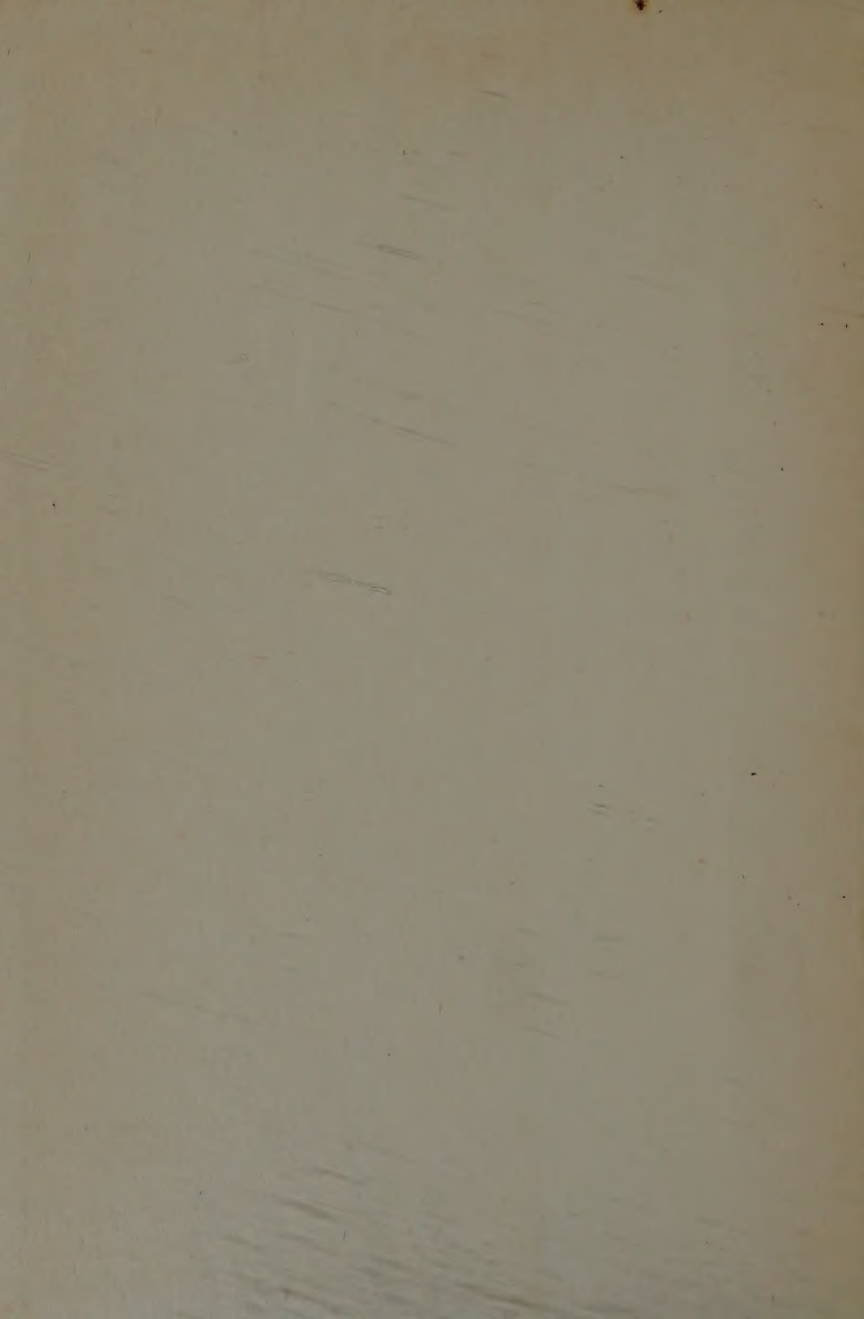
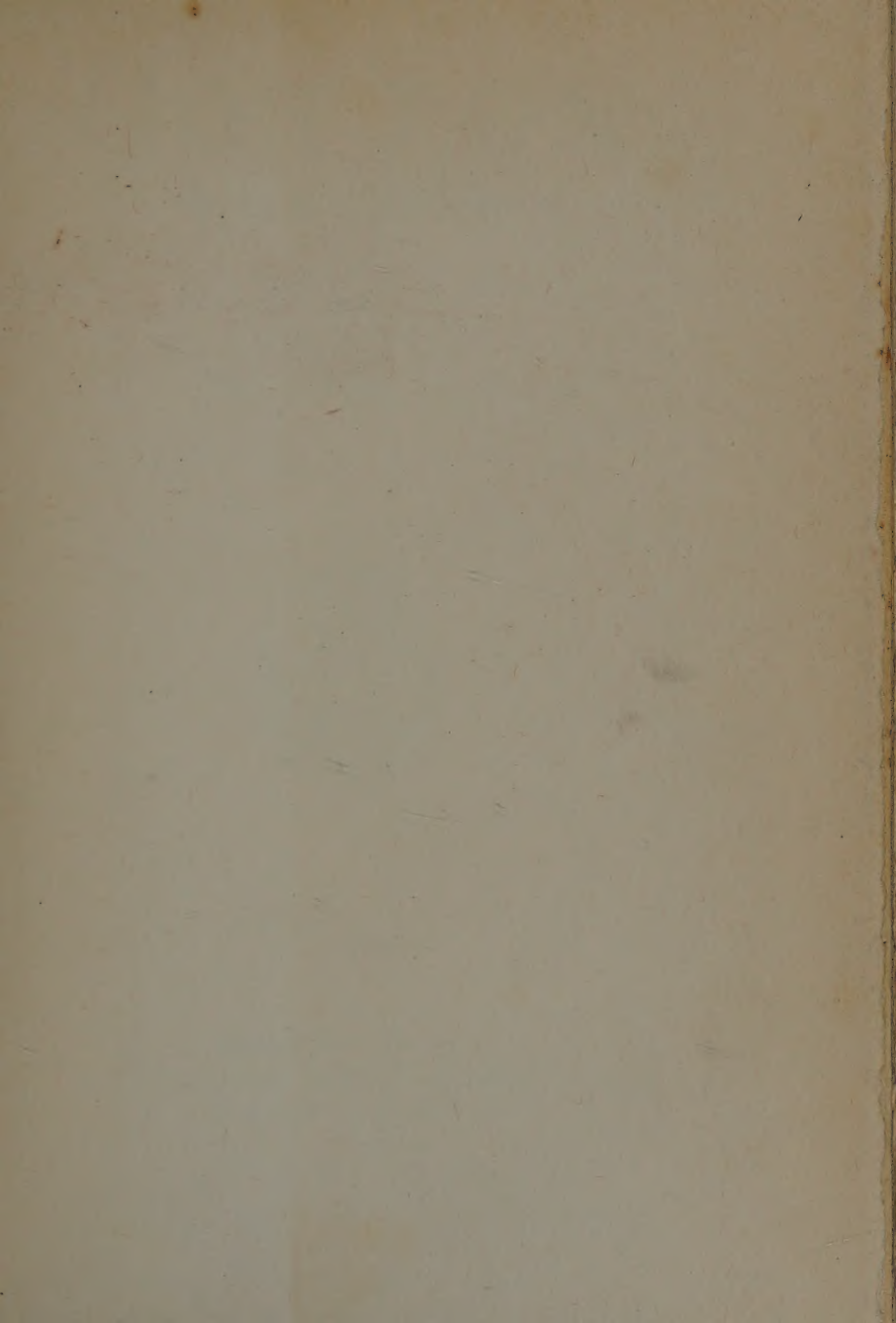


Cotton

by JACK BETHEA





COTTON

❧ A NOVEL ❧

BY

JACK BETHEA

*Author of 'Bed Rock,' 'The Deep
Seam,' and 'Honor Bound'*



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COTTON

CHAPTER I

LARRY MAYNARD's face was oddly humorous — a quiet humor of the reflective sort that seemed to have a touch of irony. He had come early into the shabby day coach of the Meridian Accommodation and settled himself in one of the red plush seats as if in preparation for a long journey.

His figure seemed too tall for the narrow cushions and his legs and body folded into awkward lengths as he sat down and looked about with quiet interest that seemed to have some deeper cause than mere curiosity.

The car filled slowly, but the man did not grow impatient. There was a curious light in his gray eyes as he followed with absorbed attention the small dramas on the platform outside.

His lips curved faintly upward at the corners and tiny wrinkles sprang into view at the corners of his eyes. He was smiling at his own interest. Was it odd that he should be so stirred at the thought that he was now on the last lap of the journey that had taken him fourteen years to accomplish? Unbidden memories darkened his face for a moment and the in-

evitable irony in him came to the surface. His smile, for all its understanding and tolerance, was a little crooked.

From time to time the door of the coach opened to admit passengers. One swift glance of the gray eyes found them familiar and catalogued them.

He was listening, too. The soft clutter of southern voices was in his ears. Here were no harsh intonations, but the liquid and slurred accents of Alabama. He had forgotten how musical were the voices of home.

The car grew crowded as the minutes passed and the babel of voices rose in a crescendo of excitement. To these people a railway journey was always an event of importance. Most of them now were homeward bound from Selma, the metropolis of the Black Belt of Alabama, and overflowing with talk of the marvels they had seen.

Outside, skies lowered and bare-limbed trees, visible up Water Street, bent under the bitter flail of an Alabama winter. Inside the car the air was almost unbelievably stuffy. But no one seemed to mind and the watcher remembered and smiled in appreciation.

There were the last few farewells; frantic dashes of belated passengers; hurried calls from those departing to those left behind and from outside rose the warning of the trainmen. In a moment the train moved out of the station in a series of neck-breaking jerks and gradually got under way.

Now the tall man seemed to find more interest

outside the windows than within the car. It was only a moment before the train left the outskirts of Selma and plunged into the rich farming country of the delta of the Tombigbee river. The soil was as black as the cinders that found their way through cracks in the draughty windows. From the color of the land the section took its name.

The man frowned at what he saw. The fields were unkempt and everywhere was evidence of slackness. In many fields cotton hung from the bolls in weather-beaten strings discolored and worthless. Even in the fields that had been picked clean, the stalks were left standing in straggling disarray.

Here and there a plough stood where the mules had last been unhitched — left at the mercy of rain and cold. These were eloquent, Maynard thought, of the whole Black Belt. His lips tightened as he looked into the future and unconsciously he squared his shoulders as if facing a battle.

Farmhouses were as untidy as the fields and with as little evidences of care. Here and there a house of really manorial dimensions flashed by in a setting of cedar trees, but these remnants of a previous era in the life of the south and of the Black Belt were not numerous. Mostly the farm buildings were unpainted, bleak, and unadorned, surrounded by out-buildings with sagging roofs and gaping windows.

Hours passed, but Maynard did not grow weary. His face now was turned more frequently to the window for he was beginning to recognize familiar landmarks. They crossed the iron bridge above the

yellow flood of the Tombigbee. Once it had limited his horizon.

They passed Uniontown and Ellawhite and his nerves tightened. He gazed out eagerly on land that he had tramped as a boy. There was the water tower and its pond where he had gone swimming on many a summer day. There was Red Ridge with its crown of cedars. That had been his favorite spot to hunt rabbits.

Then he began to recognize plantations and at last he saw the house for which he waited — a stately home with columns and green Spanish blinds, the whole outlined against a line of stiff and formal poplars.

He gazed until the house was hidden by cedar trees that crowded down to the railroad track. He smiled a little wryly as he put on his overcoat and picked up his suitcase, for already they were entering the outskirts of Lebanon.

He found it hard to vision himself as master of the Yates plantation. She would be there — and his pulse stirred at the thought. He wondered what Mary Ruth Yates would say if she knew what had really brought him back to Lebanon.

Maynard glanced out the window and wondered. The platform was filled: then he smiled in recollection. Lebanon came down to meet the train, but there were more to meet it now than when he was a boy. The place must have grown more than he thought.

He stepped off the car steps into sudden confusion.

There was a chorus of voices in his ears: hands seized his suitcase. Men pounded him on the back: strangers shouted: 'Hello, Larry!' and, 'We've been looking for you.'

An incisive voice suddenly took dominance. 'Wait a minute, boys,' it ordered. 'Step back a little and let's do this thing reg'lar and formal.'

Maynard saw a clean-cut, ruddy-faced man whose vigorous movements belied his white hair. His face was vaguely familiar.

'I guess you don't remember me,' said the spokesman, seeing his bewilderment. 'I'm Afton Gilchrist. I used to know you when you were a little chap. . . .'

Afton Gilchrist! He ran the biggest store in Lebanon! Larry's wonder grew.

'... We are the glad hand committee of the Lebanon Civic Club and we're down here to welcome you home. We're glad to have you come back. Mr. Grider told us you were coming. I guess we know more about you than you do about us. Fourteen years is a long time . . .'

Larry found something in his throat that he swallowed with difficulty. His face flushed a little as he grasped Gilchrist's extended hand. 'It's awfully good of you to have taken the trouble to come down here. I — I, well, you know how it is getting home again.'

Gilchrist beamed. 'Sure, I do!' he said. 'We are glad you feel like that. Now I want you to meet all the boys.'

Gilchrist took him around the circle. There were

names to conjure with in the Black Belt. Cunningham and Calhoun and Winfield and Beaumont and Wilmot and Rice and Fletcher and Fleetwood. Good Lord! These people had come down here simply to meet him! His head must be a little light! That — or else there was a reason that he hadn't fathomed. But he was too happy for doubts.

Gilchrist took his suitcase and the committee crowded around. 'Come on, let's go up to the Lebanon House. We've already reserved you a room until you go out to the plantation. And we've put you up for membership at the Lebanon Club. . . . You'll join the Aarons County Cotton Growers' Association, of course. And there'll be other things, too.'

There was an eager chorus from those who surrounded him and the group moved off up the street.

They had left the station only a few steps when behind them — from across the railroad — an automobile siren bellowed an imperious summons. Gilchrist looked around. 'Wait a minute, boys. Here comes Evan Shelby now.'

They halted until the shining sedan overtook them. It was a beautiful thing, low hung, power in every line of its sleek hood. A negro chauffeur in natty uniform sprang out and opened the door.

Out stepped a mountain of a man and threw up an arm to the group on the sidewalk as he waddled forward. His face was broad and even in the chill air was beaded with perspiration. His great paunch came up almost to his chin and his legs twinkled

rather than moved. But they supported his massive bulk with surprising strength.

His little blue eyes, deep in the fleshy folds of his face, were twinkling as he approached with outstretched hand.

'I see he's come,' he boomed. And then to Maynard, 'Well, Larry, my boy, I'm glad to welcome you home. Lebanon can use men like you who've gone out into the world and come back with the stamp of success and power upon you. We're glad to have you. Glad, my boy!'

There was an awkward pause. Larry Maynard had half turned and stood with hands in the pockets of his overcoat. His eyes were almost violet and his lips had settled into a straight line across his chin. He stared bleakly at Shelby, ignoring the outstretched hand.

'Thank you,' he said at last, and turned on his heel, leaving Shelby staring after him, his pendulous lower lip trembling and an injured look in his small eyes.

CHAPTER II

THERE was a moment of stricken silence as Maynard walked slowly away. Gilchrist and the others looked questioningly at Shelby. After a moment he recovered his poise, although the blood came into his cheeks in a muddy flood and for an instant his eyes grew glassy: then his face smoothed. He motioned slightly and turned back to his car.

Maynard offered no explanation when they overtook him and they made no comment on the incident. That would come later when they could voice their amazement freely. Tactfully Gilchrist began pointing out changes that the years had wrought in Lebanon.

Larry thought the joviality of the committee was a little forced and his crooked smile shone briefly as he met their talk in kind. At the Lebanon House they did not linger, despite his invitation, and while he stood looking after them, Henry Grider came in the door.

Grider was rather pudgy; bald, with mild eyes and a broad, florid face.

'Howdy, Larry,' he said. 'Come on over to the bank whenever you're ready.'

Larry flipped a quarter to the bellboy, whose eyes bulged. 'Take my grip upstairs.' Then to Grider, 'I'll go with you now.'

The Aarons County Bank of which Grider was president stood on the opposite corner from the Lebanon House. It was utilitarian rather than ornamental, a one-story, weatherbeaten brick structure of unpretentious exterior. Grider led the way through the front to his office in the rear.

He pushed forward a chair for Maynard and sat down behind a desk piled high with papers. He rubbed his bald head slowly.

'I saw that over there,' he said. 'I wish you hadn't done that.'

'I suppose you mean Shelby.' Maynard did not defend himself.

'No use startin' a row the minute you hit town,' complained Grider.

'I didn't.'

'Maybe you don't think so. How do you 'spose Evan Shelby'll feel about your treatin' him like that right before all those folks? Think he'll like it?'

'I hope not.'

'You'll get your hope, all right. He's a bad man to cross in Aarons County, Larry.'

'Perhaps.' Maynard's tone was indifferent.

'He's the biggest cotton merchant in this section and I guess he could buy and sell any two men in this county.'

'I'm not for sale.'

'Sometimes he can force a sale,' said Grider ominously.

Maynard laughed. There was a hard note in his mirth. 'Who knows it better than I do? Did you

expect me to shake hands with him? You know what he did to my father. Dad never knew an easy moment after he began to borrow money from Evan Shelby to make his crop. I suppose he's gone on getting richer, has he?'

'Sure. Any man can get rich who's so close he'll skin a flea for his hide an' taller. But, Lord, you ain't holdin' a grudge about those old days are you? Not now, anyway?'

There was the same look in Maynard's face now as when he had fronted Shelby.

'Listen, Mr. Grider, I guess you've forgotten a few things. But I haven't. You've never been a tenant farmer on one of Evan Shelby's farms. My father was. Shelby cheated him. I know that now. Cheated him on his accounts, cheated him in the money he advanced, made him pay outrageous interest for it and forced him to sell his cotton as soon as it was ginned. Father wasn't successful as a farmer. Maybe not. But Evan Shelby had a lot to do with it. I watched my father break his heart. I've worked in the fields from daylight until I couldn't see the rows any more. I did that year after year. I stayed with Father as long as he lived.' His voice sank. 'Evan Shelby virtually killed him, Mr. Grider. Think I'll shake hands with him? I don't have to.'

Grider looked at him apprehensively. 'I had no idea you were feelin' like that all the time I've been writin' to you.'

Maynard laughed shortly. 'I suppose not. And you wouldn't have known now if Shelby hadn't tried

to pretend he was glad to see me. Shelby always hated us. He was poor white trash and he'd fought his way up. I suppose he got in the habit of being merciless. Observation has shown me, sir, that no task-master is so hard as one who was once a slave himself.'

Maynard had lost his temporary heat. The ironical note had come back to his voice. Grider looked at him keenly.

'I hope you are not going to prove the truth of that, son,' he said.

'What?'

'What you've just said. Accordin' to your own account — an' I guess it ain't far wrong — you were once pretty well down yourself. Now you're on top. Don't forget the other time.'

Maynard shrugged. 'It's up to me to produce dividends for my owners, sir. That's another thing I've learned. Get results. Get them easily if you can. But get them.'

Grider's broad face was pained. 'I'm sorry to hear you talk like that, son.'

'I — I'm sorry, sir. I suppose that Shelby thing rather threw me out. I'd like to forget some of the years I put in on his place. Mother . . . wasn't strong. Oh, well. It's done with. But I'm not pretending I like Shelby.'

'We-el, I suppose there ain't any way he can bother you. You an' him won't cross anywhere that I can see. You won't have any cotton to sell. And he won't be advancin' you any money. You'll have

your own money to make your crop. Looks to me like your position's pretty sound.'

There was a glimmer of a smile in Maynard's face. 'I'm glad you think so, sir.'

'But don't get biggity,' warned the banker. 'Swell head's the hardest disease to cure I know of.'

'Have you seen any signs?'

'No-o, but I wish you hadn't done Evan Shelby like that. You've been away from this county a long time and you don't realize what a power he is yet. Specially after a year like the last one when he's about all the ready money there is in the county. 'Tell you, folks that raised cotton last year had a tough time.'

'Ye-es, I know. That's one of the reasons I'm down here.'

Grider stared. 'I'd figgered it the other way round. What's the use of a cotton mill raisin' cotton when it can buy it cheaper 'n it can grow it?'

'That's what the Old Man said when I sprung my proposition. I convinced him and I ought to be able to convince you. Want me to try?'

'I never expect to get too old to learn.'

'Maybe it's true that a mill can buy cotton cheaper than it can grow it in the field. Personally I don't think so and I've seen cotton raised in Egypt and India as well as right here in Aarons County. And it's up to me to prove my belief this year on the Yates plantation. But that isn't what you're interested in, is it? It's the mill angle.'

'I'm interested in anything that's to do with cotton. That's how I make my livin'.'

'Well, right now we've got a surplus of cotton. The present crop was seventeen million bales and there was a carry-over from last year of a million bales. The world only consumes fifteen million bales a year, so that you had a surplus of three million bales, and you had cotton selling for eleven cents middling right on up to Christmas. How much did it cost to raise that crop?'

'Lord, I don't know.'

'Of course you don't. But you raised some, didn't you? You've got a place over on the river?'

'Yes, I got a hundred-bale place over there.'

'But still you don't know what it cost you to raise your cotton?'

'No,' confessed Grider, 'I don't. And I don't know anybody who does.'

'I do. That is, I don't know what your particular cotton cost, but I know what the average is. I've been doing some investigating. It cost over fourteen cents a pound to raise and you average one hundred and seventy pounds of lint to the acre and four hundred pounds of seed.'

'That's about right,' nodded Grider.

Maynard went on rapidly. His eyes fired and his face took on an unusual animation. 'If you ran your bank like you do your plantation you'd have a State examiner here in a week and your depositors would be lucky to get fifty cents on the dollar. That's one of the things wrong with cotton farming. The cotton

farmer is the laziest man in the world. He raises a crop that takes him one hundred and fifty days' labor and he expects to get three hundred and sixty-five days' pay for it. Won't do, sir. Not if you're going to be as shiftless as the average cotton grower.'

'How can you change it?' Grider leaned forward, hands on knees, interest lighting his face. This was a new gospel to him.

'Keep books. Know what your labor cost is. Know what your raw materials are going to cost. Cotton is an industry just as well as steel, and the same economic laws that govern steel govern cotton. Industry now is occupied with falling prices and increasing wages. That isn't any different from the cotton problem. How is industry meeting it? By reducing overhead and increasing production. Mass production, I think the phrase is.'

Grider looked bewildered. Maynard's thought processes were too rapid for him to follow. 'But how can you do that with cotton?'

'Easy. Increase your yield with the same labor outlay. It's just as easy to grow two hundred pounds of lint cotton to the acre as it is to grow one hundred and seventy.'

'But how can you do that, workin' on shares?'

'I'm not going to work on shares.'

'Wha-a-t!' Grider's spectacles fell off in his astonishment. He groped for them, never taking his eyes off Maynard. 'I never heard of such a thing. You can't do it. It'll take too much money. And then you'll run your costs way up.'

‘That’s where you’re wrong, sir. I’ve figured it out. I’m gambling that I’m right — gambling my standing with Cade-Reynolds and Company and I’m gambling myself.’

Grider shook his head bodefully. ‘It’s a bigger gamble than you think.’

There was nothing boastful about Maynard; only an air of quiet confidence. ‘Mr. Grider, I’ve given fourteen years of my life to this. I’ve been dabbling with cotton ever since I can remember. They used to carry me out to the fields in a splint basket. I know I’m right. I’ve got to be. Or I’ve wasted my time. And I don’t believe I have.’

‘Maybe not, but that still don’t explain the mill angle. Why should Cade-Reynolds and Company send you down here to grow cotton when they can buy all they want in the open market any time?’

‘Well, I’ll have to draw an analogy from industry again. Everybody seems to think that there always will be plenty of cotton and that you can buy it for a song and do the singing yourself. They used to think that about coal. And about iron ore. And limestone. But just the same every big steel company now owns its own mines and its quarries and some of them own their own railroads. Look at the rubber folks. They’re spending hundreds of millions of dollars growing their own rubber. It’s a part of the development of industry, sir. It’s a speeding-up of the wheels of business. Cotton has lagged so far, but it isn’t always going to lag and when it does

wake up, the men who haven't seen it coming are going to the wall.'

'And your boss ain't one of them?'

'I should say not. Look at his mills. Alex Cade was one of the first textile men to see the advantage of getting close to the source of supply with his mills. He got out of New England before he had lost his shirt fighting strikes. As soon as hydro-electric power came into the South and there was plenty of it, he picked up his mills and came South. Now he's got a steady labor supply, cheap power, low freight rates, and he's underselling every mill in New England.'

Grider wagged his head admiringly. 'Pretty smart. And this is another one of his jumps?'

'We-el, yes. I've dreamed about this ever since I got through college at Auburn. Cade is a man you can sell an idea to. I sold him mine. I made him see what was coming.'

'But with a seventeen-million bale crop ——'

'That's an added argument. He's pioneering in another direction there, too. I know what the South always cries when there's a big cotton crop and the price goes down. Reduce acreage! Don't plant so much!' Maynard's voice was scornful. 'They haven't learned a thing from the whole panorama of industry. When has any industry ever prospered by restricting output? Didn't it nearly smash union labor in America? Hasn't it bound England hand and foot? Reduce acreage! What rot!'

'Why, son? Tell me why, because that's just what I been advisin'.'

'Because it violates an economic law. Lord, won't the cotton farmer ever learn anything by looking at other industries that had just as hard a problem as he did? What did the automobile industry do when it found it had more automobiles than it could use? Did it curtail production? It did not. It went out and created new markets for its products. And that's what the cotton industry must do. When that day comes — and it will come — instead of consuming fifteen million bales of cotton, the world will use thirty million and cry for more. When that time comes, mills that can get cheap cotton will be on top and will stay there. That's the day Alex Cade is planning for.'

'Why hasn't it ever been done before?' questioned Grider weakly.

'It has,' answered Maynard promptly. 'The British have seen the light already. The biggest cotton plantation in Mississippi is owned by Manchester mills and is run by a former government cotton expert. I've been down there looking things over. I think I can show them a trick or two. I'm going to try, anyway.'

Abruptly Maynard lapsed into his habitual drawl. Animation left his face and the ironic note came back into his smile.

'I guess you think I'm talking pretty big,' he said apologetically. 'I — I guess I forget myself when I begin to talk about cotton. You — you see, I've lived with it so long.'

'Son, the more you talk the more I want to hear,'

declared Grider heartily. 'What you say listens mighty good and I hope it'll work out like you say, but I been nursin' cotton nearly twice as long as you've been born an' — an' — oh, shucks, I don't want to be discouragin'.'

The iron in Maynard showed for an instant. 'You won't,' he said briefly. 'I'll never be satisfied until I prove myself that I'm wrong. Now I've got the chance and I — but I'm not making any predictions. Just watch me.'

'I am. Ready to talk business, I guess.'

'Whenever you are, sir.'

'I've been waitin' for Mary Ruth. I sent out for her in my car and she an Mis' Yates ought to be here any minute now.' He walked over to the window and looked out. 'Here she comes now. I thought it was about time.'

He did not see Maynard's face change. It was as if he had pulled down a window. Enthusiasm faded out. He became almost impenetrable. But there was something tense about him as he rose at the sound of footsteps.

A girl in a threadbare black coat came into the room followed by a gray-haired woman even smaller than she.

Maynard's eyes were keen under his lowered lids and his hands gripped the chair — hard.

CHAPTER III

GRIDER's greeting of the two women was explosive. 'Well, Mary Ruth, it's all right! Your problem's solved.'

Without giving her an opportunity to answer, he hustled them to the fire where a pot-bellied stove glowed cherry-red, in valiant conflict with the outside chill. He placed a chair for Mrs. Yates, removed her worn coat with solicitous hands, and uttered little clucks of commiseration at her blue lips and trembling fingers.

'That north wind goes through you like a knife when you're in an open car,' he said. 'Scrouge right up close, Mis' Betty, and get yourself warm.'

He opened the door of the stove and pounded the coal with a pair of tongs until the flame roared, pulled forward a splint-bottomed rocker for Mrs. Yates and a straight chair for Mary Ruth. Then he stood back and beamed on them.

'Yes, sir, your troubles are over, Mary Ruth. Did you bring the papers I told you? There's Larry over there and we are ready to trade.'

Mary Ruth looked at Maynard and unbelief struggled with relief in her eyes. Maynard read her thoughts accurately. She was remembering the tattered lad who had sometimes been hired to drive her father about his farm. Lebanon would always remember him like that. No matter what he did,

Lebanon would always go back to those days. Not that he was ashamed of them! But . . .

His eyebrow went up and his smile was tinged with irony as he rose at her look.

'It's really Larry Maynard, Miss Yates,' he said.

Mary Ruth came over to him with outstretched hand. 'I should not have known you,' she said frankly, honest eyes, still a little bewildered, searching his face. 'When did you come?'

'Just this afternoon.'

'How does it feel to be at home after fourteen years?'

Larry Maynard had learned to control his feeling in a hard school and his manner was quiet. 'I feel rather like a ghost, but I dare say it will wear off in a day or two.'

He found himself still holding Mary Ruth's small hand. She had made no effort to withdraw it and now he released her fingers with a sudden flush.

'Mother and I find it hard to forgive you for not seeing us when you were here two weeks ago.'

Maynard looked at her sharply, searching for a hidden sting to her words, but her face was guileless.

'I had only a few hours,' he explained. 'And then I was not certain what I could offer. I — I didn't want to raise expectations prematurely and Mr. Grider thought it better not to tell you until we were certain I had something concrete to offer. All my time was taken up in looking over the plantation, and I really had no time at my disposal.'

Mary Ruth turned to her mother. 'Mother, you remember Larry Maynard, don't you?'

Mrs. Yates's faded blue eyes were kindly as Maynard bent over her hand. 'Edith Maynard's boy? Very well indeed. Only my memories of him were not like this.' Larry winced inwardly. 'When I recall him he was only a lad. Now —' her eyes traveled up Maynard's stalwart figure admiringly — 'now he's filled out into a really big man.'

Maynard appraised the women shrewdly and saw in their appearance evidence of what Grider had told him. One finger of Mrs. Yates's black gloves was darned neatly. Mary Ruth's coat was actually shabby, for all the distinction with which she wore it. The years had not been kind to them.

For a moment he was tempted to let his thoughts stray. Mary Ruth's face was actually haggard, and there were lines of worry about her eyes. But she carried herself as proudly as of old and her quiet manner was as disconcerting to him as it had always been. Odd that she should make him vaguely uncomfortable with a sense of his own inferiority. Certainly she had given him no cause for this vague uneasiness in her presence. Yet it had come back upon him instantly, although he was better able now to hide it than he had been as an inexperienced boy.

Once the women were comfortable, Grider plunged immediately to business. Only the concluding formalities remained, for details had already been concluded by negotiations in which Grider had been the intermediary.

Cade-Reynolds and Company was leasing the Yates plantation at an annual rental of four dollars an acre for the two thousand acres under cultivation. This did not include the Big House where Mary Ruth and her mother were to continue to live.

The lease was for three years, at the end of which Cade-Reynolds and Company might buy the plantation at an appraised price if it wished. For the stock and equipment of the plantation, Cade-Reynolds was to pay an annual rental of eight per cent of their appraised value of over twenty thousand dollars.

Mary Ruth bargained shrewdly, for she had learned much in the three heart-breaking years since her father's death when the whole responsibility of the plantation had fallen on her shoulders.

It was this that had traced the lines about her eyes and that was slowly crushing her vitality so that now Maynard appeared in the rôle of rescuer. Mary Ruth watched him covertly as he and Grider inspected papers, signed them, and passed them to her. She was surprised at the changes that the years had brought in his face. He was a stranger and yet not an alien.

She had known him when they both went to the little frame school at the head of Lebanon's main street. That building had long since given away to a neat brick structure. The change was no less marked than in his face.

There was a confident air about him. The aura of the outside world clung to him. Even his clothes

were different, a gray tweed that set off his figure perfectly.

Odd, the changes the years brought. In the old days she had rather looked down on him. Not consciously, perhaps, but she could not forget that he was the son of Braxton Maynard who farmed for Evan Shelby. She'd felt a little superior then. Now . . . she smiled faintly. Did he have any idea how desperate her situation had become on the plantation? Not even Uncle Henry knew that? Only her mother . . . and Evan Shelby.

Wasn't it rather wonderful that Larry Maynard should have chosen her plantation? She could thank Uncle Henry for that.

But life was queer. She could guess what had brought Larry back — the same stubborn pride that had kept him at school despite the incessant demands of his father's farm for labor. Unbidden, an incident out of the past came back to her.

She and Maynard had been in the same grade and one Saturday Doris Mayo had given a party — a watermelon-cutting on the lawn of her father's home at the head of Water Street. She had invited every member of the class except Larry Maynard.

Even then Mary Ruth had suffered with Maynard in his humiliation. He had given no sign that he knew. He ignored the whispered plans of the gleeful youngsters in his class. Only his smoldering eyes betrayed his feeling. It was a brutal thing to do. Across the years Mary Ruth remembered her pity and her feeling of helplessness — for Larry

Maynard even then was not one to whom one proffered sympathy unasked.

Had other slights like that brought him home to show himself before the people who had known him as the plodding son of an unsuccessful tenant father? He had traveled a long way, she thought. It had taken courage and resolution and grimness . . . and these things she read in his face. She rendered unconscious tribute to him that was warmed by her feeling of gratitude for the load that he had lifted.

Womanlike she began casting about for some means of repaying him. Even as the thought crossed her mind she knew that it was foolish. After all, he was getting value received and he didn't need her help. But perhaps . . . Maynard was speaking.

'About the only thing that remains to be settled now is the terms of payment. It's customary to pay when the crop is marketed.' Maynard had been using his eyes and now he stretched the terms of his instructions from the mill. 'We can pay you a thousand dollars now; a thousand on June 1 and the balance on November 1. We'll also pay the money for the stock and equipment on November 1. Will that be suitable?'

'I think so.'

'Good. Mr. Grider, I'm going to use your bank and I'll open up an account. Here's a draft for two thousand dollars on the Greenville First National. You can credit me with that and then charge this check against it.'

Grider heaved himself to his feet and went to the door where he gave rapid instructions to a clerk. When he came back to the table, he asked:

‘How much credit will you want?’

‘None, sir. Thank you very much.’

Grider stared at him, his eyes wide. ‘Wha-at! you ain’t goin’ to borrow money to make your crop?’

‘What would you charge me for it if I did?’

‘Eight per cent.’

‘Then why borrow it when we have the capital sufficient for operating expenses? That’s one of the corners I expect to cut with Cade-Reynolds behind me. It all enters into the price of your cotton when you deliver it. Cade-Reynolds can borrow money if necessary at five and a half per cent. Why should we pay eight per cent for it?’

‘None that I can think of right now,’ admitted Grider. ‘I never thought of it just like that.’

‘But we’re going to use your bank, sir. We’ll keep a sufficient balance here. When it gets low I’ll give you another draft.’

The papers were brought in and signed after careful perusal. Maynard drew Check No. 1 in his new book and passed it across to Mary Ruth, who handled it respectfully. She looked across at Maynard and her face was inscrutable.

‘Well, Larry, the place is yours. When do you want it?’

‘The sooner the better, I suppose. How would Monday do? There’s considerable preparation that

I must do even before the spring ploughing begins.'

Mary Ruth nodded. 'Any time. It's your responsibility now.' She lifted her shoulders as if they felt lighter.

'Well, suppose I come out Monday, then, and get going.'

Mary Ruth nodded. Her mother leaned over and whispered to her, then turned to Larry.

'Where will you stay, on the place or here in Lebanon?'

'Why, somewhere on the plantation, I suppose. Wasn't there an overseer's house? I seem to remember seeing one. I'm used to roughing it. Besides, I'll be so busy that all I'll need will be a place to sleep.'

Elizabeth Yates put out a wrinkled, delicate hand. 'Oh, no, Larry. That isn't necessary. We — Mary Ruth and I, thought you might like to come up to the Big House with us? We — we're rather lonely and with nothing to occupy us now! We'd be glad to have you.'

Maynard's face flushed darkly. For a moment he hesitated, throwing a swift glance at Mary Ruth, who was looking out the window. Then he inclined his head.

'You are kinder than you know, Mrs. Yates. But I — I'm afraid I'd be a lot of trouble. You see, I've got a big job before me and I don't expect to keep regular hours. I couldn't govern my time so that you ——'

Mary Ruth turned back from the window. 'That won't matter, Larry. We'll be glad to have you.'

Maynard bowed. 'Then I will come — thankfully.'

CHAPTER IV

A RUSH of homesickness swept Larry Maynard for an instant as he followed Mose Dawkins into the front upstairs bedroom at the Big House.

Mose was black and bent and gnarled after a lifetime in the service of the Yates family. He bent deferentially and his mellow voice was caressing. 'Ole Miss — (That was Mrs. Yates) — say this here's your room, Cap'n. Your fire's already laid an' there's fresh water in your pitcher.'

The years rolled back for Larry as he stood in the center of the high-ceilinged room — a faint scent of lilac delicately on the air. The accumulated loneliness of his years of wandering shook him as he stood motionless, his gray eyes vacant and his lips curved in a little twisted smile.

Mose, after one look at his face, discreetly busied himself with unpacking the contents of Larry's small trunk.

The room was of magnificent proportions, but the scars on woodwork and paper testified to its age as well as the sturdiness of its construction. French windows cut completely down to the floor lighted every nook and Larry could see that in the morning the early sun would fill the place with golden splendor.

The room was garishly furnished to modern eyes, but Larry, looking closer, recognized every item.

First, the four-poster bed of dusky black walnut. Above was a canopy, and Larry did not need to be told that in summer it bore a mosquito netting, for the windows were innocent of screens — but now it was bare of curtains. A feather bed covered by a gay patchwork quilt stirred memories . . . home had been like that at one time.

In one corner a wardrobe reared massive proportions; beside it was the bureau; behind a screen was a washstand with a marble top bearing a pitcher and bowl . . . why, things hadn't changed in all the years he had been away. Lebanon itself might have been modernized, but here there had been no intrusion.

Even the chairs were the same . . . atrocities in turkey red plush with elaborate scroll work. They had been fashionable before the Civil War . . . and the carpet . . . a rag affair made in the sewing-room of the Big House by the busy needles of the plantation women.

Mose coughed gently and Larry took a deep breath. 'Kin I git you anything else, suh?' the negro asked. 'Does you want me to light your fire?'

'I hardly think so now, Uncle Mose,' said Larry.

Mose's white head bobbed at the 'uncle.' Here was white folks what was quality folks. But shucks! He might have knowed. Ole Miss wan't totin' home nothin' but quality.

Mose left Larry to make a rapid toilet and a moment later the bell rang for supper. Larry found Mary Ruth and her mother waiting for him at the

end of the huge hall downstairs that led into the rear veranda. The dining-room, fitted in dark wood smoked with age, was of similar proportions to the remainder of the house. The small table, set for three, was an island of light in the glow of a green-shaded kerosene lamp. It was covered with spotless napery, but Larry could not help seeing that a darned place was only half covered.

The silver was heavy and of antique pattern. Larry summed it up mentally in two words: 'Land poor.' He read the struggle of the two women at a glance; no need to tell him of the heart-breaking attempt to maintain tradition and the standard of the past. Well, he'd change that . . .

With exquisite tact, Elizabeth Yates put him at ease. He recognized the beautiful courtesy that made awkwardness impossible and there was a queer feeling in his throat. He had met nothing like it in the outside world.

'Mary Ruth and I will feel more comfortable with a man in the house,' Elizabeth Yates said. 'We have never become accustomed to depending on ourselves, I'm afraid.' She sighed, but there was no complaint. 'It was really a great favor to us for you to come.'

Mary Ruth said little, leaving to her mother the burden of the conversation. But her dark eyes went to Larry's face when he was not observing her and her glance was speculative.

The meal was as revealing as the house or the dress of the two women. It was simple, consisting

of flaky rice, round biscuits served in a napkin to keep them warm; sweet potatoes baked until their sweetness dripped forth in a sugary torrent; a chicken fried with cream gravy.

Mose, wearing a white coat, had appeared from the shadows to serve the meal faultlessly.

'We'll have our coffee in the parlor,' suggested Mrs. Yates, and led the way to where oak logs burned blue on brass andirons.

Again Larry looked around with a smile of remembrance. A grand piano of black walnut gleamed in the firelight; marble-topped, gate-legged table bearing wax figures under a glass dome: Dresden china statuettes of shepherd boy and his lass on opposing ends of the mantelpiece: an oil portrait on the wall: in one corner a what-not bearing stacks of papers.

Elizabeth Yates did not linger. Her coffee finished, she rose. 'I'm going to leave you young people together,' she said. 'There will be many things for you to talk of and I am a little tired from the excitement of to-day.'

Larry held the door open and her wrinkled, delicate hand rested on his arm for a moment as she passed out. Larry came back to stand gazing down at the fire.

Mary Ruth cupped her chin in her hands and looked at him. 'I suppose that I ought to feel that you are a stranger, but I don't,' she said directly.

'That's kind of you.'

'No, it isn't. Sincerity is not kindness. I cannot

think of you as the representative of a great textile corporation. I don't think of you as a citizen of the world. I keep remembering that you are Larry Maynard with whom I went to school years ago. And somehow you don't seem a stranger at all.'

For a moment Larry forgot the restraint he had put on himself and feeling rang in his voice. 'Believe me, I am not. I wonder if you know just how kind you are being.'

Mary Ruth sat up. 'I am curious,' she said.

'Yes?'

'About you. I'll confess it. You puzzle me.'

'Oh, no, Miss Yates.'

Mary Ruth stopped. 'You don't mean that.'

'What?'

'Miss Yates.'

'But ——'

'What's the use of pretending? Of being affected. Did you call me that when we went to school together? I've just told you that I remembered you only as in those days and then you — you do that.' Her air was faintly reproachful.

Larry looked at her intently. 'Would you have us go back to those days?' he asked slowly.

'Why not?'

'I — I wondered.' He smiled dryly. 'I have learned the un wisdom of presumption.'

Her eyes opened wide. 'You presume! Oh, Larry!'

Her eyes were appraising him. 'But I meant what I said,' she repeated. 'You do puzzle me.'

'How could I do that?' There was genuine amusement in Larry's smile.

'You do, though. I can't help but wonder why you came back to Lebanon.'

'I was raised here.'

'Perhaps that is it, but that hardly explains. We have heard a lot about you since the day I saw you at the bank. In fact all Lebanon and the whole county — you have been the chief topic of conversation.'

Larry was smiling. 'And what have they said of me?'

'Oh, it was all good. They found that the British Government sent you to India and to Egypt to show them how to raise cotton. They've found about your work at the mills in Massachusetts. I think you would be surprised if you understood how much they really have discovered about you.'

'I'm glad,' said Larry simply. 'I'd be foolish and a liar if I said I didn't care.' He let down his guard for a moment. 'I think I've missed that more than anything else. There was nobody I cared about to know when I — I had done something. But, after all, the explanation is very simple. I was assigned by my firm to do a certain job. It was necessary for me to come here to do it.'

She frowned in perplexity. 'That's the obvious explanation, of course. But it does not satisfy me. Why should you bury yourself in this little place when you could go anywhere — cities, the east — even Europe? That's what I don't understand.'

'Surely, Miss Yates ——' He paused as she looked at him and corrected himself awkwardly. 'Mary Ruth, then. I've told you all there is to tell.'

Her tone was still musing. 'There's something else, too. You not only came back to Lebanon but you chose this place instead of any of the dozen others in Aarons County that you could have leased.'

'All of us do incomprehensible things at times.'

She threw her head back and regarded him levelly. 'There is an explanation that is possible.'

He wondered at the sudden change in her tone. Her manner chilled. Her face composed itself. Her voice grew cool.

'I don't know what you mean,' he said wonderingly.

'How much do you know?' she challenged bluntly. Mary Ruth could be very direct.

'Do I know?' he echoed.

'Yes — about Mother and me.'

'Why I only knew ——'

'Did you know that we are as poor as church mice? Did you know that I'd tried running the plantation and failed? Did you know that I was being crushed by trying to keep the place going for Mother? Going deeper into debt every year? I'll speak plainly. Did you come back here to see our humiliation as a balm to your pride? Did you choose this place so that the contrast between the present and the past would be greater? Did you do that? Is that why you have come back?'

Maynard had fallen back amazed at her outburst. At first he tried to protest; then his face grew impassive and he listened imperturbably. When she had finished he stood for a moment and then spoke quietly.

'You are sensitive. I am no stranger to that feeling. I can understand. I know you didn't mean to imply unkind things. Surely, my motives are of little importance. You were good enough to say only a moment ago that I had helped you and your mother by relieving you of the responsibility for the place. Forgive me if I refer to it, because it was not done through any — it was a business transaction.'

Mary Ruth looked into the fire and he saw that her eyes were filled. Her slender hands clasped and unclasped. At last she rose.

'I — I suppose I'm unstrung from the relief of knowing that I don't have to plan and watch and work and then go further in debt every year.'

She had walked to the door and now she turned with a misty smile. 'Forgive me. I think I'll follow Mother's example.'

But he stopped her. 'You said you were in debt. To whom?'

'To Evan Shelby.'

Larry stiffened imperceptibly at the name. Then he relaxed. 'Good-night. If I may, we'll talk about this some other time.'

When she had gone he sat down before the fire and leaned his head on his hand. He was no stranger. She remembered him as he had been

years ago in the Lebanon school. He shook his head and his face fell into lines of discouragement.

It never occurred to him that a wholly different construction might have been placed on her words.

CHAPTER V

MOST of his information about the Yates plantation Larry Maynard got by questioning Buck Farley. Farley was the clerk who attended to the plantation store where the negroes were sold the simple necessities to meet their needs.

The stock was not elaborate. Overalls, cheap shoes, cheaper candy, and food of the plainest sort. Salt meat in boxes in the rear; there were cans of lard; a molasses barrel in one corner — the place was no whit different from a hundred other such stores Larry had seen on plantations.

Farley he found to be an eagerly friendly man somewhat older than he had expected. He was not particularly prepossessing. His upper teeth protruded, from whence he got his name for they were of the kind known as buck teeth in the Black Belt. His hair was light and his eyes a washed-out blue. But he was friendly enough, volunteering information volubly and seeming so anxious to please that Larry found his servility rather annoying.

Larry had gone from the stables to the commissary that first morning and, after introducing himself, had begun to question Farley about the plantation.

‘Yes, suh, it’s a right smart place,’ Farley assured him. ‘Yes, sir, our niggers is pretty good, too. They was all kind of sot on Mis’ Mary Ruth an’ we

ain't never had no trouble keepin' 'em. I don't guess you could run one of the Yates's niggers off the place with a stick.'

'Fine.' Larry tried to make his tone hearty, but he could get no warmth in it. 'Now about the plantation. I've got to have some one I can ask about things. How many families are there on the place?'

Buck figured audibly and with much use of his fingers. "'Bout seventy-one families, I make it, suh. That is on the whole place. 'Course they don't all live in the home quarters.'

'How has Miss Mary Ruth been operating the place?'

Buck's reply was wondering. 'Just like all of 'em down here does, suh. On shares.'

Swift questioning brought further information. Miss Mary Ruth's agreement with her tenants was the customary method of farming with negro labor. She furnished the land, fed the stock, furnished half of the fertilizer, furnished the stock, furnished a house and garden for the tenant and in return the tenant furnished the labor to make his crop. After the tenant and landlord shared the cost of ginning the cotton, each took half.

Larry Maynard shook his head over what he heard, although it was not unexpected. 'No wonder she didn't make both ends meet,' he thought, and then aloud to Farley:

'Suppose you close the store and come go around with me. I want to talk with them. I want to meet

them every one. And then I want to go over every foot of the land in the plantation. We'll ride the boundaries and then I'll go into the fields. But first I want to see the tenants.'

Buck obediently locked the door and together they began their round of the plantation.

Maynard found the tenants discouraged, the men sitting idly about the cabins, hovered over the wood fires.

'Don't seem like it's no use for us to try to mek a crop,' one negro told him. 'Hit's all gone 'fore we kin git it to the gin.'

'Don't like the way you've been working, eh? Got any other complaint?'

'Nossuh. 'Ceptin' hits mighty hard to work all year an' then not have a new pair of shoes for Chris'mus.'

Then Larry sprang his bombshell. 'I've leased this plantation and I'm going to run it this year.'

'You gonna have it on shares, Cap'n?'

'No, I'm not. I'm going to hire my work done.'

'You mean us all gwine work for you?'

'Yes. You work for me and I'll pay you every Saturday night at the commissary.'

The negro's eyes brightened as he listened. 'How much you gwine pay, Cap'n?'

'I haven't decided yet. It'll probably be a dollar a day and rations.'

'Yassuh. When you gwine start? How we gonna live 'till ploughin' time come?'

'I'll have to find work for you to do.'

Larry soon found that word of him had preceded him. The apathy of the negroes vanished. Their easy natures seemed fired by some of the force of his own driving personality. Also they were curious.

'Sho must be somep'n funny some'ers. Ain't no boss man ever tried it down here befo'. Guess us kin kind of wait an' see what's comin'. I was aimin' to go up Nawth, but I guess I'll stay awhile. My sister's husban's cousin's boy's in Chi-cawgo an' he keeps writin' us to come up there.'

Larry was tireless. He was in the saddle while the yawning stable boys were still brushing the sleep from their eyes and he seldom returned until the stock had been bedded down for the night.

Word of the unusual preparations going on at the Yates plantation seeped through Aarons County. In a way the county had expected something unusual from Maynard and it awaited pleasurefully for further surprises.

Maynard early began testing the soundness of his theories. He called the negroes together and put them to clearing the fields of the dead cotton and cornstalks, burning the rubbish, clearing out fence corners, cleaning the ditches until the black water ran freely on its way to swell the morass in Wilkins's Canebrake.

The negroes worked eagerly under the stimulus of Maynard's eyes. They were anxious to please the new cap'n and they swung their hoes in time to chants that had been brought from Africa.

'I've got them all in one gang now,' Maynard

told Buck Farley. 'Of course, when ploughing time comes and I have to split them up I'll have to get some overseers to help me. But right now I can do it all myself.'

Buck Farley spoke eagerly. 'I knows of three or four folks that would shore like to git a place here,' he volunteered. 'S far as that goes I guess ha'f the county'd like to work here to see what you're goin' to do.'

'All right,' Maynard agreed carelessly. 'When I need them I'll let you know and you can tell them to come and see me.'

The swiftness with which Maynard had taken hold of the plantation amazed Mary Ruth. The Big House saw little of him during the first days after his arrival. But he usually managed to get home for supper and afterward there was talk in the parlor.

Their words were impersonal and mostly of the plantation, for Maynard's quest for information was insatiable. He begged of her every scrap of information she could remember about the land and the crops that had been planted.

'Why are you so interested in that?' she asked.

'So that I can tell how much fertilizer to use for the cotton.'

'Auburn says a minimum of four hundred pounds to the acre should be used. I never had the money to use more than half of that.'

'I'm going to double that in some places.' Larry expounded his theories of farming. 'We've got to

beat the boll weevil and the flea and there's only one way to do that. Early planting and fast cultivation by means of heavy fertilizing. It will increase our yield and we'll beat the bugs. I think I'll begin planting by the middle of March.'

Maynard observed unobtrusive changes about the house. New curtains in the parlor: the darned table cloth had disappeared; Mrs. Yates had a new dress and new gloves: Mary Ruth had new shoes and silk stockings.

Maynard saw all these things and was glad that he could make them possible. As the days passed he came more and more to feel at home at the Big House. Under the stimulus of the days of incessant work he was happier than he realized. For fourteen years he had been without a tie. There had been no one to care whether he went or stayed and the letters from Henry Grider that had told him of the fortunes of these two women had been his sole anchor.

CHAPTER VI

AARONS COUNTY did not lose interest in Larry Maynard as the days stretched into weeks and the weeks into a month. When word of what he was doing spread among the plantations men came to see for themselves that they might judge the value of these departures from the traditions of the Black Belt.

Whether they found him on a horse directing a gang of ploughhands far back in the south fields, or at the stables inspecting the stock or at the store, Larry was never too busy to stop and explain the reasons for what he did.

They welcomed him as one of themselves; unexpectedly they gave deference to his opinions and listened in grave silence while he explained. Then they asked questions, intelligent questions, and received his answers with deliberative thought.

Larry was completely disarmed and the hostility that had held him aloof during his first days at Lebanon melted completely. He had come back to Lebanon prepared to meet condescension — or worse. He knew the strength of the caste system in the Black Belt and he understood that Aarons County would remember him as the son of a tenant farmer who had failed utterly in the battle of life. He was not ashamed of his youth. He was stubbornly proud of the father who had fought on, knowing he was beaten, and who had not whim-

pered after the grind of poverty had robbed him of hope.

Larry had come back to Lebanon prepared to accept stoically the barriers that might be raised against him. He would not cringe or beg for recognition, he told himself, and smiled his little crooked smile at the thought.

This feeling had tintured with bitterness the thrill of his return and made him reserved and sensitive in his first contacts with men of Aarons County. His welcome that day at the depot in Lebanon had left him wondering if he had not been fighting shadows and in the weeks afterward had come certainty.

Major Dave Wilmot was among the first who rode over to see him. Major Wilmot had a place down on the river . . . his son Rob Wilmot had a store in Lebanon . . . Aarons County listened when Major Wilmot spoke.

Larry was across the railroad in the bottom land close to Wilkins's Canebrake when Major Wilmot found him. The major was astride a powerful roan that carried him easily.

'I stopped by the Big House,' he boomed, 'and Mary Ruth told me you were over here. This is Dave Wilmot. I remember you when you were just a colt. I don't s'pose your mind goes back that far now.'

Above the beard that cascaded down his shirt front, Major Wilmot's eyes were twinkling. His voice was hearty, but his gaze was keen, and Larry

knew that he was being shrewdly appraised. His smile held a hint of diffidence.

'I couldn't forget you, sir,' he said. 'I would have known you anywhere. You haven't changed a bit.'

Major Wilmot laughed appreciatively and, with a touch of his heel, moved his horse closer to Larry's bay. He sobered and held out his hand.

'They tell me you're breakin' new ground in the way of cotton growin' over here,' he said. 'I came over to see what it is. I never did believe in that sayin' that you couldn't teach a old dog new tricks — feller that said that didn't know much about dogs.' His eyes twinkled at Larry. 'I don't ever figger on gettin' that old.'

'I'm trying to raise cotton as cheaply as I can,' Larry said. 'And I'm using the same methods that I'd use in any other business.'

Major Wilmot took his foot out of the stirrup and slid to the ground, leaving his horse to graze where it would. He came over and sat beside Larry on a bank of the ditch and looked at the negroes working.

'It's time somethin' was bein' done,' he said soberly. 'Things are gettin' in a pretty bad way in this county. There ain't no use tellin' you that, though. You know what happened last year. There ain't hardly a man in this county that didn't lose money on his crop. I did myself an' I've always thought I was a pretty fair farmer. If the same things happen this year I don't know what a lot of us fellers are goin' to do. Some of us are pretty de-

sperate. I hear you're puttin' all this place in cotton.'

'Yes, sir. I am.'

'Think that's a good idea? What about cuttin' down the acreage?'

Larry shook his head slowly. 'That'd be all right, sir, if everybody who grows cotton would do it. If Alabama cuts her acreage Texas hears about it and will plant more cotton in the hope of a small crop and high prices. Cotton isn't like rubber, where production can be held down by British law.'

'Yes, maybe you're right. But I never could see how it worked out about cotton. The bigger crop you make the less money you get for it. There's somethin' wrong somewhere. This county last year produced twenty-eight thousand bales of cotton, an' received for it ——'

Larry interrupted. 'Wait a minute, sir. How much of that cotton is in the hands of the farmers now?'

Wilmot turned his head and looked at him. 'Why less'n a thousand bales, I guess.'

'And this is only the last of February. When did the new cotton begin to come on the market?'

'Why, about the first of September. I forget the exact date when the first bale was ginned, but it was right around the first of September.'

'So that in about five months, Aarons County farmers have disposed of their money crop in spite of the fact that cotton was bringing less than it cost to raise it. That's true not only of Aarons County

and Alabama, but of the whole South, isn't it, Major?

'Yes, I guess it is. Fact, I know it is. The government report'll tell you that.'

Larry hesitated a moment and Major Wilmot looked at him again. 'Go on,' he urged. 'Don't stop there. You had somethin' else in mind, didn't you?'

'No-o, not exactly, sir. But that's the trouble with cotton, I think. The same rules govern the marketing of cotton as any other commodity. Supply and demand fix prices for cotton as well as for wheat or rubber. We cotton people are ignoring that and are flooding the world with a twelve-months supply of cotton in five months and expect it to absorb it without any effect on prices. It can't be done.'

'But we can't help ——'

Larry spoke earnestly. 'Yes, you can, sir. Now — as at present — it is a progressive condition that gathers momentum within itself. Millions of bales of cotton are dumped on the markets of the world. Naturally the price breaks. The farmer here in Lebanon rushes his cotton to market so that he can sell before it goes down any further. That is done all over the South and down goes the price under the weight of the distress staple rushed to market. It's a vicious circle. Cotton always comes back after the fall rush of marketing, but by that time the staple is out of the hands of the growers and the profit that should go to them is no longer possible.'

Major Wilmot got up heavily. 'Everything you

say is true,' he admitted soberly and sighed. 'I don't know what we're goin' to do. This can't keep up forever. And I can't hold my cotton. I've got to pay the merchant that credits me an' my niggers so he can pay the wholesaler so that the wholesaler can pay the manufacturer. We can't stretch the credit structure beyond a certain point without a smash. I ain't so sure that smash ain't closer'n anybody thinks.'

Larry glanced at him keenly and said nothing; he judged that he had gone far enough to start him thinking. Sooner or later Major Wilmot would ask the obvious question. What could be done? In Larry's mind an idea that he had only dreamed of vaguely was taking definite shape.

Before Major Wilmot left he had seen everything and Larry was quietly pleased. There had been no constraint. He could not doubt the quality of Major Wilmot's praise.

There were others and they were equally kind. Larry hid his pleasure that was too deep for words and met them with the flawless courtesy that he had learned in far countries. But there came to be more than courtesy between them: friendship developed. Larry lost his sensitiveness. Aarons County took him for her own and her people welcomed him.

He spoke of it diffidently to Mary Ruth one night when they were sitting on the steps looking up at a new moon that peeped over the poplars.

'I have you to thank for this,' he said a little huskily. 'I hadn't expected it.'

Mary Ruth was a little shimmering figure in the darkness, but he could catch the turn of her head and the curve of her throat. The weather was almost warm and in the air was a moist hint of spring that comes early in the Black Belt.

‘You mean the folks in the county?’

‘Yes. I — I don’t know what I did expect, but nothing like this.’

‘They’re proud of you,’ she murmured.

‘They?’ he questioned.

There was a ripple of laughter. ‘We,’ she amended.

‘I am very grateful.’ He was tense for a moment and then his body relaxed as he controlled himself. ‘You know, it’s the first time in fourteen years that I’ve felt as if . . . as if I were at home.’

‘There are worse places than Lebanon,’ agreed Mary Ruth and rose. ‘We’d better go in. Mother will wonder where we are.’

Larry rose reluctantly. Such moments were all too rare for him. Mostly their talk was of the plantation or of cotton, but there had been something intimate about their companionship on the steps. He wondered if she had noticed anything in his voice. Was that why she had gone in? He hadn’t meant to go too fast. But his jaw set stubbornly. Sooner or later he’d tell her, but he couldn’t go too fast.

He’d have to be sure first. Suppose he . . . he told her . . . and she remembered what the others had forgotten. Casual social contact was one thing.

Marriage was another. And he couldn't afford to risk anything yet.

He argued it out with himself before he went to join Mary Ruth and her mother in the parlor. He had told Mary Ruth the truth. The Big House was home to him. The loneliness of the years was leaving him. Suppose he went too fast and she . . . he'd have to leave the Big House. He didn't want to do that. He'd have to wait. Out came his little crooked smile. And he didn't want to wait. Not a minute.

Larry's acquaintance in the county widened. He met Richard Cunningham from the northern end of the county and took him over the plantation. Patrick McNath drove over from Robbins's Cross Roads. Earl Fletcher: Abner Beaumont: Christopher Rice. He came to know the substantial men of Aarons County and he liked them.

Larry never missed an opportunity to point out to them the reasons for their condition.

'Orderly marketing. That's the answer,' he told them. 'I know something about that. I know about the credit. And money tied up in the cotton crop must be released. But it isn't necessary to take a loss to do it. Ten years ago, yes. But not now. The South has ample money to finance its own operations and even behind that it has the resources of the United States Government.'

'You mean through the Federal Reserve Bank?'

'Of course. You ought to be familiar with the process. You know that a receipt for cotton stored

in a bonded warehouse is adequate collateral for loans in any bank in this country up to sixty per cent of the value of the cotton. The banker can take this receipt and your note and rediscount them with the Federal Reserve Bank and thus release enough money to hold the cotton until a reasonable price can be secured for it.'

He was speaking to Richard Cunningham, one of the younger generation of Aarons County planters.

'Then you think that holding cotton ——'

'I believe that orderly marketing of the crop over a period of twelve months instead of four will stabilize the price and give you a fair return.'

'But we haven't got a warehouse,' Cunningham said thoughtfully.

'That could be remedied,' Larry pointed out and the two men returned to the Big House where Mary Ruth served them tea in fragile china cups that had been bought in New York long before the Civil War.

CHAPTER VII

THERE was a light tap at Larry's door, but he was so absorbed in the papers over which he bent at the desk by the east window that he did not hear and it was repeated more loudly.

'Come in,' he called, thinking it was Uncle Mose with water. He continued his study of the figures he was setting down in a long column. He heard the door open. 'Put it down over there,' he said absently, without turning his head.

'Please, sir,' cried a laughing voice 'I forgot it.'

It was Mary Ruth and Larry pushed forward a chair for her with a pleased word of welcome. He took the green shade from the kerosene lamp and the room was flooded with the mellow glow. Mary Ruth thought his face looked drawn and tired even in the kindly light.

'You work too much,' she said. 'Don't you know that all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy?'

'I've heard something like that.' He mused for a moment. 'I guess I've forgotten how to play. You can, you know. But when you've set yourself a goal — something definite to work toward — you get so absorbed that you forget there is such a thing as play. Besides, when there's nobody to play with ——'

Mary Ruth nodded. 'I know. Of course I never

had anything like fourteen years of it, but I had enough to know what it means.'

He had begun to wonder at the reason for her visit when she told him.

'I've come to get you. You need a night away from those papers. It won't hurt you to play one night.'

He eyed his desk doubtfully, though his pulse moved a beat faster. 'There's a lot to do ——'

'Nonsense! Elsie Hand is giving a dance to-night and it's the last one before Lent. She's asked us both and you're to take me.'

Larry's gravity fell from him instantly. He rose and bowed with exaggerated courtesy. 'She who must be obeyed,' he said, masking his feelings by lightness.

Mary Ruth dimpled at him. 'I've a new dress that I've never worn before and some silver slippers that I'm rather proud of. But, of course, if you're busy ——'

Larry didn't even pause to debate the matter. He swept his papers into a heap and banged shut the desk. 'Not any,' he said definitely. 'Formal?'

'Yes. And we're to be there by nine o'clock.'

'Good. I'll have the chariot at the door by eighty-three or pull a cylinder out,' he promised.

Immaculate in dinner jacket and snowy shirt front and with a cloak thrown over his arm, Larry met her at the foot of the stairs two hours later. His face was eager as he looked up at her. She came

down the dusky stairs slowly and with conscious effect.

She was dressed in ivory, the delicate tint matching the clear olive of her skin. To his masculine eyes, her gown was a mystery. He knew only that it clung to and outlined her figure in baffling curves. About her slender throat was a single thread of pearls and in the dark hair piled carelessly atop of her small head a circlet of green brilliants sparkled in the light. It was the single touch of color in her costume.

At the foot of the stairs she stopped and turned slowly about for his inspection, one arm half raised and her piquant face alight with mischief. Larry stepped backward and bowed from the hips in continental fashion.

'I am overwhelmed,' he said. 'Miss Yates, I salute you.'

And with that he lifted her hand, bent over it and raised her cool fingers to his lips.

Mary Ruth flushed furiously and snatched her hand back. 'Silly,' she chided. 'Where did you learn such nonsense?'

He stood before her with head bowed. 'Please, ma'am, they do that where I've been at,' he said with too-elaborate humility.

She frowned. 'You have been in very strange places,' she said severely.

Their gravity could last no longer and the hall echoed to their laughter. She curtsied deeply.

'I am overjoyed to meet with your approval,'

she said, her eyes dancing. And then she pretended to look about for something. 'Dear me, the florist has been very careless. I ordered my flowers for seven o'clock.'

Larry tossed back one fold of the cloak he carried and disclosed in his left hand an enormous bunch of violets. 'I shall speak to him about it,' he said. 'Meanwhile, I have secured these for you.'

Mary Ruth gave a little cry of surprise. 'Why, Larry, you didn't! How lovely! Where did you get them?'

She took them with eager, caressing fingers and buried her face in their fragrance. Larry did not answer and she repeated her question, 'Where did you get them?'

It was Larry's turn to flush. He had not expected such insistence. 'I — I — out there.' He waved his hand toward the door.

'In the yard?'

'Ye-es.'

'You — you picked them yourself?' Mary Ruth's voice rose in a little crescendo of surprise.

'Yes,' said Larry, very red.

'Since I told you about to-night?'

'Yes.'

'But it was dark.'

'Uncle Mose held a lantern for me.' He grinned feebly. 'You had to have flowers and violets are the only ones open in the yard.'

'They're lovely.' Mary Ruth was no longer bantering. 'Thank you. It was thoughtful of you.'

Their ride into Lebanon in the ramshackle flivver was rather silent. Mary Ruth caressed her flowers with tender fingers and Larry was content that she should be beside him.

He wondered if he had done right about the violets. She hadn't seemed to mind, but there had been no more joking. Larry knew little of women: he had always found the thought of the one beside him sufficient.

'We've plenty of time,' he volunteered once.

'Yes,' she answered absently. 'Years.'

He was in no hurry to reach Dr. Peter Hand's home, set far back from the street. The driveway leading through the oak-studded lawn was already filled with cars when he could loiter no longer and turned at last into the arched gate.

They were pounced upon as soon as they descended from the dressing-rooms. Mary Ruth was instantly the center of a little group of laughing men in the soft glow of the Japanese lanterns that had been substituted for the more garish electric lights.

Everywhere she went voices were upraised to greet her. Men bowed over her hand with the easy courtesy that lingers among the plantation gentry of the Black Belt — a heritage from their Virginia and French ancestors that remains as well as the need for morning coffee.

Young girls came and stood for an instant beside her, slipping an arm about her waist and whispering into her ear. Elderly women patted her shoulder and inquired after her mother.

Nor was Larry less at ease. Doctor Hand saw to that. Peter Hand was not much older than Larry himself and his blond cleanness made an interesting contrast with the darker and more aquiline features of Maynard.

Larry danced and danced — the first with Mary Ruth, of course. She came scarcely to his shoulder, and looking down, Larry could see only a cluster of shimmering hair and a small nose.

Caught for a moment in the eddy of dancers, Larry found himself beside Major Wilmot, who tugged at his beard and looked on with an indulgent eye. He laid a hand on Larry's arm.

'I've been lookin' for you,' he said. 'Come into the library a moment.'

Wondering, Larry followed him. In the library he found the older men whose dignity would not permit dancing.

Major Wilmot spoke apologetically. 'It's a shame to talk business at a party, but us old folks can't seem to get away from it.'

'That's all right, Major,' Larry said. 'I was a little tired.' He smiled ruefully. 'I was in the saddle the most of the day.'

'The folks here in this room come pretty near bein' representative of Aarons County,' Wilmot explained. 'I guess we grow nearly half as much cotton as all the rest of the county put together. We've been thinkin' an' plannin' 'bout this year's crop an' also we've been payin' pretty close attention to what you've been doin' an' sayin'.'

Larry threw his cigar into the open grate and faced them. 'Yes, sir,' he said expectantly.

'You've said considerable about a warehouse. We've found that we can build one that'll hold about ten thousand bales here for about five thousand dollars. We're all pretty badly bent, but we ain't absolutely broke. Are you interested in this?'

'Very much, sir.'

'I hoped you would be. Well, the upshot of it is this. We aim to form the Aarons County Warehouse Corporation, build us a warehouse an' hold our cotton against warehouse receipts in the fall.'

'That's the wise thing to do, sir.'

'Yes. Well, the only trouble is that none of us here know anything about warehouses an' how to run 'em. You do. To come right down to the point we've asked you in here to see if you wouldn't run the thing for us.'

Larry deliberated before he answered, even though he knew what the answer would be. 'If my mill doesn't object,' he said finally. 'I'll be glad to do it. I don't think they will.'

Larry hid his exultation under a grave face. They were giving his ideas back to him and thinking them their own. He had planted the seed and they did not realize where they originated.

'I'll do anything I can, sir.'

'We want you to attend to the marketin'. My idea is to put it in a straight twelve-months pool with the standard farm bureau contract providin' for sellin' any time in that year that the market agent of

the association thinks is best. You know cotton, don't you?'

'Yes, sir.' Larry was thoughtful. This opened avenues that he had not considered. 'I was buyer one year for Cade-Reynolds. And I've studied the market since.'

'That's what we thought. Y'see, here's the way it is. I guess you know more about cotton 'n any man in Aarons County. All we know is how to grow it. We want you to handle all of this for us an' we won't be close 'bout the pay.'

'That doesn't matter,' said Larry quietly. 'I'll do it for the county, of course. You've been more than kind to me. I'd like a chance to — to do something.'

'You see, there's such a lot of things to be done,' Wilmot resumed. 'I looked into it till my head got to swimmin' an' I threw up my hands an' hollered for help. Bonds for the State, an' the Fed'ral Government, licenses for graders an' weighers, insurance, an' Lord knows what. You know about them, don't you, Larry?'

Larry smiled. 'Yes, sir. I was in a warehouse too. It isn't as hard as it sounds.'

'Tell me!' rumbled Major Wilmot skeptically. 'Well, we'll kind of circulate the word around and we'll get the thing started at this month's meetin' of the Cotton Growers' Association. That's next week, ain't it, Abner?'

'Yes, Thursday.'

'Well, Larry, you be at that meetin' an' we'll get

things done formal an' official an' turn you loose. Think you can have it ready by fall?'

'Oh, yes, Major. It isn't much of a construction job.'

The men crowded around him, patting him on the shoulder.

'I'll swear,' said Christopher Rice. 'I can begin to take some interest in the crop this fall. I believe we're startin' in the right direction.'

Larry was sober as he went back to the dancing, leaving them with their grizzled heads close together. The responsibility was great. But so was the opportunity. He squared his shoulders and went in search of Mary Ruth.

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN the Aarons County Cotton Growers' Association met that week in Judge Howell's courtroom in the courthouse, not a seat was vacant. Major Wilmot and the others had been busy with missionary work and when Larry came in with Mary Ruth he was summoned to the platform by Major Wilmot and bidden to explain again the necessary steps to form a cotton pool and build a warehouse.

'There's one thing to remember,' he warned them just before he sat down. 'You can't sign a contract to put your cotton in this pool and then change your mind. We're going to use the standard form of contract and that provides for the full twelve-months pool with all cotton sold through the association.'

But Major Wilmot had done his work well. Even the mention of money did not frighten them.

'Sure I'll sign a note,' one lean-faced man said with a laugh. 'I couldn't be any flatter broke than I am now. One more note ain't goin' to make much difference.'

Many of them felt like that. They had finished their year's work in debt. The sale of their cotton had not brought them enough money to pay the cost of growing it. Now they must gamble on another year and begin under an inherited burden.

They were willing to try anything, and what Major Wilmot and the others advised they accepted.

'You can go up an' see Judge Fleetwood 'bout gettin' incorporated in proper form,' Major Wilmot told Larry. 'Then you'll have to start out gettin' the contracts signed an' the notes arranged. I'll see Henry Grider an' I reckon the lot of us can manage to carry 'em until the cotton is marketed.'

The motion to form the Aarons County Warehouse Corporation was carried unanimously and when Major Wilmot proposed that Larry should be named market agent and manager of the warehouse and pool there were even cheers.

Larry was going to where Mary Ruth sat when he felt a hand on his arm. He looked around to find Evan Shelby at his elbow.

'I'd like to talk to you for a minute,' said Shelby mildly. 'I've got a proposition to make you.'

Shelby's smile was ingratiating. For a moment Larry hesitated and then some inner instinct warned him. 'Very well,' he agreed. 'Let me tell Mary Ruth and her mother.'

Arrived at his office, Shelby motioned Larry to a chair and from his desk drew a box of cigars which he extended.

'No, thank you,' said Larry.

Tossing away the tattered fragment on which he had been chewing, Shelby chose one himself. He looked it over deliberately, passed a moistening tongue over it, bit off the end, and then applied a match. Through the smoke haze his small eyes peered shrewdly at Larry.

'I was considerably interested in what you had to

say up at the meetin', he said. In his tone there was nothing but friendly interest. 'Yes, sir, considerably interested.'

'I noticed that you were,' said Larry.

'That come right close home to me. Y'know, I run a small warehouse of my own here an' I guess I buy more cotton 'n any other man in Aarons County.'

'And make money at it.'

'Ye-es, I've done right well. I've made what little money I had work for me. It's made more and there's a quick turnover in the cotton business if you've got your capital liquid an' stay out of the futures market. I never had no ambition to gamble with cotton. 'F I wanted a leetle excitement, there's allus a chance of a nice stiff game of draw poker some'rs 'roun' here on Saturday night. I find that keeps me kind of ca'med down. No, sir, I never had no honin' for futures. I was allus willin' to handle the actual cotton itself. There's somethin' mighty comfortin' an' solid 'bout a bale of cotton. It's five hundred pounds of money.'

Maynard wondered what was coming. The man was talking as if they had been friends all their lives. He became more wary.

'We were poor white trash,' Shelby said musingly. 'I ain't 'shamed of it. Don't know but what I'm a leetle proud of it. Sometimes, lookin' back, I don't know but what I take some comfort in seein' how steep the hill was. Yes, sir, come fifty years ago we was poor white trash. Why, I guess I was all of twelve years old 'fore I knowed there was any kind

of meat except sowbelly. We lived on one of them little patches down on the Tombigbee River, an' we had to fight the niggers for work to make a livin'. Now I'm drivin' round in a Palace automobile with a nigger chauffeur an' 'bout four times as much house as I need. Quite a little piece to come, ain't it Larry?'

'Pretty far,' Larry answered imperturbably. He was waiting for Shelby to show his hand. The big fat face was overlaid with a veneer of blandness, Larry told himself, but he could see beneath the surface.

'Ye-ah, pretty far. Took me the better part of thirty years to do it, but I done it an' I'm proud of it. I ain't never forgot an' I never will an' it don't hurt my feelin's none to know some folks here in Aarons County turn up their noses at me. They don't do it to my face an' when they want money they come to Evan Shelby for it. I ain't 'shamed of my folks nor where I came from. I was nineteen years old when I made my first thousand dollars an' I been goin' ahead right along since.'

'I see,' said Larry.

Shelby opened his eyes wide and stared blankly for an instant at Maynard. He had lost himself in the years behind him.

'Yes, sir, I been goin' ahead ever since,' Shelby resumed. 'Fust one thing an' then another. Folks here say I never went into nothin' I didn't make pay. Well, they don't know it all. I lost lots of times, but I never fell back 's far as I was when I started into a

thing. I guess the county'd take my word now for most anything I wanted to say. They kind of respect my judgment an' they look up to me to see what I'm goin' to do an' then they're ready to follow. It all comes from goin' through with what you start. I've kind of got into the habit of winnin'. An' I'm goin' to keep right on in that habit.'

Maynard nodded without speaking. He was impressed, for Shelby was not boasting.

'I s'pose you're wonderin' why I brought you up here to tell you all this, ain't you?'

'A little.'

'Ye-ah, I thought you would be.' Shelby's manner lost its easy benevolence; his eyes sharpened and somehow the muscles in his face tightened. He was no longer pursy and fat. 'I told it to you to kind of give you an idea of my mind. I wanted you to size me up. You got plenty of brains, young feller. Nobody could of gone as far with Cade-Reynolds and Company as you have and not had brains. I told you all this so's you'd git them brains to workin'. Also I wanted you to see how many chips I had in the pot.'

'All right. I've done that. Now what?'

'Larry, what'll you take for your lease on the Yates place?'

'It's not for sale.'

Shelby again put on an air of benevolence. There was no rancor in his tone as he argued. 'I knowed you'd say that at first. Your first answer was bound to be just what you said. That's the kind of boy you are. But now git them brains of yours to work an'

see if you can't figure out a way where it'd be more beneficial to all concerned for you to turn over that lease to me.'

'Why should I?' Larry, too, could mask his feelings and speak dispassionately.

'Because it'll be so much easier for all concerned. You'd make a profit. I'd make a profit an' Mary Ruth'd make a profit. Everybody'd git somethin' an' nobody lose, not even Cade-Reynolds, 'cause there's plenty of other places you can lease some'rs else than Lebanon.'

Larry struck straight from the shoulder. 'Why don't you want me in Aarons County?'

'That's a fair question an' I'll answer it the same. An' since we're bein' frank I'm goin' to say to you in as friendly a way as I know how that I ain't goin' to have you in Aarons County.'

'I see. Why?'

'For two reasons. First, you represent Cade-Reynolds and Company. I ain't anxious to see Cade-Reynolds in this county. Sooner or later we'd fall out. There just ain't room in here for me an' Cade-Reynolds both. I ain't got nothin' 'gainst 'em. 'S far as I know they're nice folks. But they're big folks an' they've got plenty of money an' they're a corporation an' there ain't no tellin' how long they're goin' to be like they are now. Well, I found Aarons County an' I sort of figger I got a prior right here.

'I been ready money here too long to have somebody come along an' give me a shove an' me go yelpin' off with my tail between my legs. So I figgered

it'd be kind of nice if you an' me could arrange it between ourselves. It'll be an accommodation to me an' I don't never ask nobody to accommodate me for nothin'. I ain't trying to bribe you, so don't let your bristles raise up. But when I buys somethin' of value from anybody I expects an' I'm willing to pay for it. I ain't tryin' to conceal from you that takin' Cade-Reynolds out of Aarons County 'd be quite a big favor to me.'

'You said there was another reason?'

'Ye-ah, there is an' I guess that's a little more personal. It's this here warehouse thing. Now you come right clost to home with me. You know what I been doin'; I been buyin' cotton when it come on the market an' I been holdin' it in my place till the market kind of got over its didoes that allus come long 'bout October an' November. Now speakin' plainly I been makin' quite a nice little sum every year like that an' I don't look kindly on no other warehouse.'

Larry spread his hands. 'That's too bad,' he said.

'He-ah, it is. Too bad for you, 'cause if I would of stood for Cade-Reynolds comin' in here I wouldn't of stood for this. I don't know why you picked out Lebanon, but there ain't no reason why you can't make another pick for, say, six thousand dollars, is there?'

'You mean you're offering me personally six thousand dollars for the lease on the Yates place?'

'It's 'bout six months' pay for you, ain't it?'

'About that,' admitted Maynard. 'You are making me that offer?'

Shelby sat up briskly, apparently encouraged by Larry's tone. 'Yes,' he said definitely. 'You turn over the Yates place to me an' I'll give you six thousan' dollars over an' above what you've already put out gittin' the place ready. How about it?'

'It doesn't interest me,' said Larry calmly.

Shelby was taken aback. 'You won't take it?'

'No.'

'Why?'

'For the best reason I know. I don't want to.'

'Um-m-m. Stubborn as hell!' For an instant his small eyes glowed balefully, but his voice was without edge. 'That don't leave me but one thing to do.'

'Yes?'

'If you won't sell that lease, I've got to take it. There ain't no other way out.' He spoke earnestly. 'Son, I'm too old to like a fight just for the sake of fightin'. I've made you a good offer. Don't say I didn't warn you.'

'You did. I shall remember it.'

'You stand to lose your place with Cade-Reynolds if you fall down on this. Cade-Reynolds is a Yankee firm an' what they want is results. They ain't got any use for failures.'

Larry smiled and said nothing.

'There's other things you might lose, too. 'Cause I ain't goin' to sit down an' twiddle my thumbs. I'd a whole lot rather be friends with you an' settle this thing like folks ought to settle their affairs.' He leaned forward anxiously. 'Sure you can't see it that way?'

'No,' said Larry briefly. 'Much obliged for your warning.'

'I see.' Shelby straightened. 'Well, it didn't do no harm to make you a proposition first,' he said. 'There ain't nothin' personal in this.' He walked with Maynard to the door and slapped him on the back. 'Come up an' see me any time you're in town.'

Maynard went thoughtfully down the steps. He had not for one moment underestimated Shelby's warning.

CHAPTER IX

As the three of them drove homeward in the battered flivver, Larry was so quiet that Mary Ruth prodded him gently about his silence. She was in the front seat with him, her mother in the rear, and after riding nearly a mile without a word from him Mary Ruth could stand it no longer.

‘Why so silent?’ she asked.

The abruptness of Larry’s answering question startled her. ‘Is there any reason why Evan Shelby should not want me to have your place?’

‘Why — why, no. Not that I know. Why?’

Larry ignored her question. ‘Has he ever given you any reason to think that he was unfriendly?’

‘Certainly not!’ Mary Ruth was decided. ‘Mr. Shelby is one of the best friends Mother and I have. I don’t know what we would have done without him. I’ve heard about you and — him. I haven’t mentioned it because it was no concern of ours. Mr. Shelby is our friend and you are, too. So we said nothing.’

Larry turned speculative eyes on her. ‘I wonder if he is,’ he said slowly.

‘Don’t be absurd. He helped us when I didn’t know where to turn.’

‘Helped you? How?’

Mary Ruth glanced back at her mother. ‘Go on

and tell him,' Mrs. Yates said. 'There isn't any reason for keeping it from him now.'

Mary Ruth was silent a moment and then spoke soberly. 'It isn't particularly pleasant, but there's no use trying to hide from you that I made a terrible failure with the plantation.' A shadow crossed her face at the memory of the anxious months when the strain had grown steadily heavier. 'When Father died Mother wanted to sell the place, but we both loved it. I'd been raised on the plantation and I thought I knew something about farming. I undertook to run it so that we wouldn't have to leave.'

'Where does Shelby come in?' Larry asked.

'I'm getting to him. To begin with, he was Father's agent in Lebanon and when I began to direct the plantation in the spring after Father died Mr. Shelby helped me a lot, steered me away from a lot of things. But he was a real friend in need in the fall when settling time came.'

'How?'

'That was the year the boll weevil hit us so hard. When I came to settle up with the stores and everybody I found that I owed a lot of money that I couldn't pay. There was over four thousand dollars that I had to have.'

'And Shelby loaned it to you?'

'Yes.' Mary Ruth's tone was grateful. 'He did. Of course we gave him a mortgage on the plantation as a security for the money and paid him interest, but even then I couldn't have gotten it anywhere else. I — I didn't want anybody to know about it

so he never recorded the mortgage. I thought I could pay it the next year — but that was worse than the first.'

'What happened then?'

'My cotton was all low grade and I couldn't get much for it. If it hadn't been for Mr. Shelby I don't think I would have sold it at all. But he handled it for me and I went in debt some more. It — it was twenty-six hundred dollars that time.'

'He loaned you that, too?'

'Yes.' She swallowed hard. 'But last year was worst of all. You know what the price of cotton was. But in addition to that my cotton was worse than middling again and Mr. Shelby took nearly a month to sell it for me. He didn't get much but every cent helped. That was when I got desperate and decided that I'd lease the place before Mother and I lost everything.'

'How much did Shelby lend you last year?'

'Nearly six thousand dollars.'

'So that you owe him ——'

'I owed him \$12,926 until you leased the place. Of course I paid him every cent of the rent that we could spare and it doesn't cost us much to live.'

'What interest did he charge you?'

'Eight per cent.'

Larry frowned in perplexity. 'There isn't anything unusual in that. But there's something here that won't bear the light.'

'I don't see why you should find it so peculiar that Mr. Shelby should help us.'

'Of course not,' Larry commented. 'His purpose wouldn't be obvious or he wouldn't have done it. I know Shelby.'

Mary Ruth was a little impatient. 'What do you mean?' she asked sharply. 'What happened between you and Mr. Shelby?'

Larry looked at her and even in her exasperation she noted the curve at the corners of his gray eyes. 'He told me he was going to run me out of Aarons County,' he drawled. 'The county isn't big enough for him and me, he said.'

He was unprepared for the effect of his words. The color drained from Mary Ruth's face and there was fear in her eyes. 'You're not going?'

'Hardly,' he said. 'It's nothing for you to worry about.'

'It is something to worry about, too,' said Mary Ruth soberly as the flivver drew up before the front gate of the Big House. 'I wish he hadn't done that. It — it frightens me. Mr. Shelby was kind to us, but he can be hard. They say things about him that —' she broke off and shivered, nor was she reassured by Larry's confident reply.

'It's nothing. I wouldn't have told you if I had known that it would frighten you. Anyway, you are not involved and I think I can take care of myself.'

Nevertheless, Larry did not dismiss Shelby's warning so easily as he would have had the women believe.

But what could he do? Larry asked himself the question down at the stables where he sat on the

fence and listened to the crunching from the stalls where the mules were eating their night's measure of corn.

Larry thought long and soberly. So far as he could see, Shelby could do nothing. Larry was under no obligation to any bank. He had not asked for credit either at the bank nor at the stores and Shelby could not reach him there. He could put no financial pressure on him.

Larry's lease was law-proof, he knew. Only the other day he'd had a letter from the Old Man saying that the contract and the lease had been approved by the Cade-Reynolds lawyers. Shelby couldn't touch the place; besides, Shelby would have to have Mary Ruth's consent for anything like that and Larry guessed shrewdly that he had already tried there and failed.

Shelby couldn't interfere with marketing his crop, because Larry had every pound of cotton he produced sold before ever he ran a furrow. Shelby couldn't hurt him that way.

Night came down and still he sat on the fence and went over the situation in his mind. He found no spot where he was vulnerable and nowhere that he could forestall any possible move by Shelby.

But still a vague sense of uneasiness held him.

He climbed stiffly down from the fence, spoke to Rufus Miles, the stable boss, about mules for snaking out the cross-ties from the swamp on the morrow, and went slowly toward the Big House.

He passed the cabins of the Big House quarters,

and inside, could hear light-hearted laughter. The windows glowed red from the fires that blazed in the squat clay chimneys, and occasionally there was song, muffled by the walls, but piercing in its sweetness.

He paused for a moment before a cabin from which came a magnificent alto.

'It's me, Oh, Lord,' the mellow voice sang. 'It's me-e, it's me, Oh, Lord . . . Standin' in the need uh prayer . . .'

Larry laid a hand on the paling fence as he listened. He was ready for Shelby . . . He was not afraid. Something of the coldness of the slender moon riding high overhead and touching the orchard trees with a chilly light entered his nature. He rather welcomed the thought of conflict with Shelby. He might have an opportunity of paying off some old scores. His hands tightened. If he could once get a grip on Shelby he would know how to squeeze. He'd be as merciless as the man himself.

'It ain't my sister . . .' sang the voice inside. 'It ain't my brother . . . It's me, Oh, Lord . . . Standin' in the need uh prayer.'

Larry only half heard. He walked on toward the Big House, his steps ringing out crisply on the frozen ground for the weather capriciously had turned cold.

He squared his shoulders as he entered the front door. He smoothed his face for the women's eyes. They must not know that he waited for a blow to fall — for fall it would he was confident.

Darkness came, too, back in Evan Shelby's office,

but he still sat in motionless thought, as when Larry had left. From outside came the shimmer of electric lights and the sputter of the arc lamps. Windows winked into being in the courthouse, for dusk comes early in the Black Belt during the winter.

At last he roused himself and went into the outer office, where a black figure was drooped over a stove.

'Ed,' said Shelby, 'you know Mr. Buck Farley, don't you?'

'Yassuh, I sho does. He runs th' sto' out to Cap'n Yates's place. Dat the gen'man you mean, Mist' Evan?'

'Yes. I wish you'd make it your business to drop around out there to-night and tell him I want to see him. Tell him he better come in to-morrow night after he's through for the day. Tell him I said come out to the house. I want to talk to him.'

'Yassuh,' agreed Ed. 'I'll take my foot in my han' an' rack on out there right now.'

Shelby stood a moment listening to the negro's shuffling footsteps. Then he turned back to his office. Shelby was a man who believed that the time to prepare for a fight was before it started.

CHAPTER X

BUCK FARLEY's voice rose and fell endlessly and Evan Shelby listened without comment or interruption, his face as expressionless as the wall behind him.

His monstrous body was sunk in the recesses of a huge chair, but even so it overflowed the arms and drooped in flabby folds through the scrollwork of the back. His short legs were sprawled out before him and both hands nursed his stomach that spilled onto his knees.

His chin was sunk in the fleshy layers of his neck and his eyes were fixed steadily on Farley.

He did not look away and then back again. His eyes never wavered from Farley's face and his gaze was almost hypnotic, although he showed neither pleasure nor anger.

It was Sunday morning and Farley had come early to Shelby's house on his plantation on the River Road. He had come there rather than to the office at Lebanon on Shelby's specific orders, and he had been shown into a back room that was half office and half sitting-room — a desk in one corner and a sofa in another — and here Shelby had joined him.

For more than an hour Shelby had listened and Farley had rendered a detailed and minute account of events on the Yates plantation and particularly with reference to the actions of Maynard.

Shelby had not hurried him with questions; the big man had merely listened in massive silence and Farley had turned his mind inside out as one would empty a sack of corn into the hopper of a mill.

He searched his mind as one would probe an empty pocketbook, found nothing further, clucked a few more meaningless sentences, swallowed thirstily, and dropped into an expectant silence.

‘When will he start ploughin’?’ Shelby’s deep tone filled the room.

‘In ’bout another week. The only thing he’s been waitin’ for is to git this here warehouse thing of his’n all fixed up. I heard him tell Rufus Miles to start feedin’ corn of mornin’s next week and he’s ordered that for a week before ploughin’ starts.’

Shelby grunted. ‘What do the niggers think of this new scheme of his?’

‘Mist’ Shelby, they is plum tickled. Puts me in mind of a dog with a bow on his tail.’

‘Can you do anything with them?’

‘Mout,’ answered Farley cautiously, and cackled venomously. ‘There’s allus some you kin manage one way’r another.’

‘How many could you handle if you had to, Buck?’

‘I don’t really know, Mist’ Shelby. But you know how niggers is twixt white folks they knows and ones they don’t. I c’d conjure ’right smart of them I guess. ’F I started out right an’ with the right ones.’

‘U-m-n,’ Shelby’s eyes closed reflectively. ‘Many’s half of ’em?’

'I don't rightly know, suh. I'm feared not. Them niggers is sho' pleased 'cause they got six bits in their pocket on Saddy night.' Again he cackled and there was something verminous about his mirth. 'Been me runnin' things they wouldn't be so uppity. Fust thing you knows them niggers goin' to be so biggity there won't be no doin' nothin' with 'em. Say somethin' to 'em and they'll git on a train and start right now for Birmingham. I been hearin' 'em talk.'

'U-m-n. He would hold 'em till they worked out their debts.'

Farley shook his head scornfully. 'There ain't more'n a dozen that's more'n a week behind. The rest of 'em 's done worked it out. Biggest fool thing I ever heard of. You can't keep niggers raisin' cotton less'n you keep 'em in debt.'

'Don't owe him nothin', eh? U-m-n.' Shelby rubbed a hand across a stubby chin. 'Nothin' to keep 'em from goin' if they wanted to?'

Farley looked at him sidewise. Shelby was one of the few men of whom he stood genuinely in awe. With Larry Maynard now he had been eagerly servile, but in his heart he hated Maynard. He hated all who were his betters — hated them indiscriminately and took out his spleen on the helpless negroes.

Farley wasn't afraid of Maynard; in fact there were few men in Aarons County whom he did fear. Shelby was one of them, for Farley was daunted by the big man's unwinking gaze and once or twice he

had seen the little blue eyes hidden in folds of flesh sink further back and grow lighter.

Such a sight made him absolutely ill. Something happened to somebody when Mist' Shelby looked like that. Farley had worked for Shelby for years and knew him shrewdly. This employment was not always admitted — take his work on the Yates plantation, for instance.

He'd liked that. He was puzzled but philosophic. Mist' Shelby hadn't wanted him to do anything; just wanted him to watch and meanwhile there'd been the commissary. Farley had regretted that and once or twice he had broached it to Shelby only to shrink away from the stolid look that met his question. Words were seldom necessary from Shelby to make Farley understand the unwisdom of what he did.

There were times when Farley had dreamed of freeing himself. He didn't speak of that any more. He was afraid to. He'd made that mistake, too, once. Shelby had looked at him for fully half a minute before he spoke:

'I need you here,' he had said heavily. 'If you can't stay here I know where you can stay.'

That was all, but it was enough. Let Shelby appear as his accuser in an Aarons County courtroom and before an Aarons County jury and he would be on his way to the State penitentiary down at Madison so quick — it always gave Farley a sinking feeling at the pit of his stomach when he got to thinking what Mist' Shelby could do to him.

Sometimes there were other thoughts that came unbidden to his mind; but at these the perspiration broke out over his body and he hastily began to think of other things. He was afraid that Shelby would read his mind. But somehow he couldn't get away from the thought — suppose something should happen to Mist' Shelby? He never allowed himself to peer any further than that into the recesses of his mind. Suppose Mist' Shelby should get sick? . . . Farley dallied with the thought of the beckoning outside world for a moment . . . and then came to with a guilty start as he found Shelby's eyes on him.

'U-m-m.' Shelby switched the subject abruptly.

'When's he goin' to start work on the warehouse?'

'I don't know, suh. I guess he kin start now whenever he wants to. I hearn him tellin' Miss Mary Ruth the other evenin' that he had the last of the big folks what he wanted signed up on them contracts he's been traipsin' 'bout the county with. Him an' Mis' Mary Ruth ain't been on the place scarcely a whole day sence that meetin' in Lebanon when this here thing was sprung.'

Shelby added nothing and after a period of silence Farley ventured a question of his own.

'What you want me to do, Mist' Shelby?'

'Nothing. Do what you been doin'. Come over here every Sunday. Keep me posted on what he's doin' an' what the niggers are sayin'.'

'But, Mist' Shelby, you ain't never goin' to run that man 'way from Mis' Yates's place doin' like that. You ain't had much to do with him. He's got

mo' git up an' git 'bout him 'n all the rest of Aarons County put together. We gotta do something or there ain't goin' to be no use.'

'Well?' Shelby's face was impassive.

Farley wriggled in his chair and cackled nervously. His lips lifted in a queer smile, displaying his protruding teeth.

'I — I kind of figgered I could do somethin'.'

'What?'

'Well, there's allus a bad nigger 'round. S'pose him and Long Mullen was to git in a argimint, there ain't no tellin' where it'd stop.'

Shelby looked at him imperturbably. 'Can you handle Mullen?'

'I kin manage more'n Mullen,' Farley boasted. 'All you gotta do is say so, 'n that'll kind of work itself out right, 'n nobody'd be the wiser.'

Shelby turned his head and looked at him a long time.

'Mullen — what about him?'

'He's a nigger. Who'd believe him? S'pose he did talk. Besides, the niggers'd git him away. You know how they stick together.' Farley found Shelby's level gaze disconcerting. 'Mist' Shelby, don't you want Cap'n Maynard to leave that place?'

'Yes,' Shelby said.

'Well,' Farley threw out his hands and lapsed into a rather sullen silence. Then he thought of something else. 'Are you gonna let him build that warehouse?'

'Yes,' answered Shelby.

Farley's chin dropped. 'Wha-at?' he gasped. 'How come?'

'It's the easiest way out.'

Farley shook his head in complete bewilderment. 'I guess I'm all mixed up.' He laughed reminiscently. 'When I think of what happened to those other fellers that tried to build a warehouse ——'

'This is different.' Shelby explained with no hint of feeling in his voice. 'Those other men weren't backed by the biggest men in the county, men that are pretty near as big as I am. I could handle any of them, but I couldn't take on all at once. That's where Maynard's dangerous and has to be handled different from the others. Temporarily he's got the county behind him.'

Farley's eyes glistened. 'Gonna want me?'

'I expect so.'

'What you want me to do?'

'I'll tell you that when the time comes. Right now you stay over at the Yates place, and lemme tell you this, Buck.' Shelby lifted a heavy finger. 'I don't wanta hear of your gettin' crossways with Maynard. I want you right there an' I want you to be feelin' 'round 'mong the niggers to see who you can manage and who you can't. I'll tell you what I got in mind when the time comes.'

'Yes, sir. I aims to stay on his good side.' He laughed in appreciation of the joke. 'Cap'n Maynard thinks I shore am some hand at the commissary. He comes to me for nearly everything, I guess.'

'There's another thing, and this is important.'

Shelby sat up at that. 'When are Grimes and Sellers coming to work at the Yates place?'

'When he starts spring ploughin'. There ain't a bit of use havin' two overseers when there ain't 'nough work for two gangs to do.'

'You've told them what to do?'

'Yes, suh.'

'They understand that they're to do nothin' until I say the word?'

'Yes, suh.'

'He doesn't know that they're cousins of yours, does he?'

'Not lessen he's a mind reader.'

Shelby communed with himself. 'That's all.'

Farley rose obediently. 'Aw, hell, Mist' Shelby, why'n't you do somethin'? Fust thing you know he's gonna start stirrin' roun' an' axin' questions and ginerally stir things up over there.'

'That's all,' said Shelby as if he had not heard. He took a roll of bills from his poket. Peeling off a twenty he handed the bill to Farley. 'Come back next Sunday.'

Farley pocketed the money and went out the back way. Once on the back porch and the door closed he began swearing with vicious malevolence. Farley was divided between rage and fear, and his voice shook for all his rage.

His cool suggestion that Maynard be embroiled with the negroes had a sinister purpose of his own behind it. At such moments as this Farley's hatred of Shelby flamed close to the surface.

'Damn his fat soul,' he swore. 'Ef he'd of stepped into that one. Well, some of these days he's gonna put his foot in and when he does . . .'

Farley's hands made the gesture of wringing the head off a chicken. He looked down at the ground as if he saw a feathered body flopping. Then he cackled nervously at his own thoughts and walked rapidly to where his horse was hitched behind the barn.

CHAPTER XI

WHEN the wind began to blow warm out of the south and the wild geese trailed northward in high-flying flocks, Larry Maynard started his spring ploughing, though March was less than a week old.

Henry Grider shook his head forebodingly when Larry told him. Maynard had come to Lebanon to telegraph to Montgomery for a rush order of fertilizer to be used behind the first spring ploughs.

'I'll be planting in another two weeks,' he told Grider confidently.

'Takin' a awful chance, ain't you?'

'Some chance,' Larry admitted. 'I may get a freeze and get my seed killed. That's a chance I'll take on the prospect of getting a start on the boll weevil.'

'Set down, set down,' invited Grider cordially. 'You been so busy with that warehouse proposition of yours and at the place that I ain't had a minute to talk with you. Got all your subscriptions for warehouse stock signed up, have you?'

'Yes — and that reminds me,' said Maynard, drawing a sheaf of papers from his pocket. 'Here are the contracts with promissory notes attached. You'll notice that they're made payable within ninety days and when you see who's signed them I guess you'll discount them, all right. But don't put them in. I'm not going to start with the warehouse

proposition until I get my cotton chopped. Then I'll wire Birmingham to ship my stuff, get the carpenters busy, and the place will be ready for use by the first of August, and that's thirty days before we can expect any cotton for it.'

Grider looked at him speculatively for a moment. 'You had that warehouse thing in the back of your head all the time, didn't you?'

Larry's eyes glimmered in a smile and then he laughed outright. 'Something like that might have happened,' he admitted. 'The Old Man told me that he didn't give a damn what I did or how I did it so long as I produced cotton two cents under the market. I'm going to do better than that. See this.' Larry tossed over a telegram. 'That's my order for fertilizer.'

Grider glanced at the message and then whistled in amazement. 'What you orderin' it all at once for?'

'That isn't all of it. That's the first installment. Also I can get a ten per cent discount for buying in large quantities. Fertilizer now is about thirty dollars a ton. That's three dollars a ton and nearly a thousand dollars on that order. I'm cutting every corner I can.'

'How much you goin' to use?'

'Well, the agricultural service at Auburn recommends a minimum of four hundred pounds to the acre. I sent them a sample from every one of my fields the other day. They said I should use at least five hundred pounds and they gave me the formula.'

You see, the soil is not so hard packed here as it is further south and you need less potash and more soda.'

'I never would of thought of sending dirt to Auburn.'

'Farming can be made very nearly as exact a science as engineering. The only thing you have to gamble on in farming is the weather. Well, I'm going to press my luck.'

'You mean on early plantin'?''

'Yes. The boll weevil has payed hell in this county in the last few years. Well, I know how to beat him. Early planting and fast cultivation. I'm going to push my crop. My fields are as clean as your floor and when the squares begin to fall I'm going to pay my little niggers a cent a hundred for the ones they pick up. Then I'll burn 'em and good-bye boll weevil. The ones that are on the plant I'll handle with calcium arsenate. I've already ordered my dust guns and I'll cover the whole two thousand acres.'

Larry handed over the notes and contracts for the Warehouse Corporation and Grider sent them out to be stored in the vault.

'I'll cash those notes when you need them. I see you've got the land for the place.'

'Yes, the Civic Club did that for me. You know, we are bringing a new industry to Lebanon. Cap'n Llewellyn Sikes owned it anyway and the corporation has a ten-year lease on the site. The warehouse goes to him at the end of that time if we don't

buy the land, but it will have paid for itself long before then.'

But Grider's thirst for information was not satisfied. 'You goin' to try to look after all those niggers yourself? How do you expect to get any work out of them?'

'There's two answers to that. One of them is that I've hired two overseers to work under me. I've given one of them all the fields south of the Big House and the other takes all north of the Big House. I go wherever I'm needed. Then every day I set the niggers a certain task they have to do before they take out the mules in the evening. I've been making every plough on the place cover an acre and a half a day. When you give a nigger something definite to shoot at he'll work. I haven't had any trouble getting work out of them and I don't expect to.'

'Who are your overseers?'

'Two young fellows Buck Farley at the store got for me. Monk Grimes is one of them. Ran Sellers is the other. I've been watching them since I started ploughing and I think they're pretty good chaps. I'll have more time to watch the operation as a whole.'

'What're you paying them?'

'A hundred and seventy-five apiece. I could have got them for a hundred and fifty but I wanted to make the job attractive.'

'You don't mind spending money, do you?'

'Not when I get value for it. That extra twenty-

five dollars a month will buy me a hundred dollars' worth of work. Isn't that a profitable investment? You've got to spend money to make money and I'm fortunate enough to have it at my command. I made sure of just what the Old Man would allow me before I came down here. And I'm going to get value received. Do you know what the average yield of lint cotton per acre was in the State of Alabama last year?'

'Can't say's I do.'

'It was a hundred and seventy-two pounds to the acre. Know what it was in Aarons County?'

Grider shook his head.

'It was two hundred and eight pounds.'

'Where do you get all them figures?'

'From the Government, of course. Anybody could. The extension service at Auburn puts them out and the census bureau at Washington, too. They're free to everybody if you'll use them. You can find out anything you want to know from the size of the cotton crop in Egypt to the spinnings of the mills in Manchester, England.'

'First time I ever heard of it.'

'Aarons County grew two hundred and eight pounds of lint cotton last year. I'm fixing my task as a minimum for three hundred and seventy-five pounds on the Yates place. If I have any sort of luck I may do better.'

Grider shook his head in wonderment. 'Well, maybe you will,' he said dubiously. And then his face took on an air of benevolence and his tone grew

paternal. 'Lissen, son, we've talked so much 'bout cotton you'd think there wasn't nothin' else that mattered. How you gettin' along?'

'How do you mean?'

'You know — with — with her.'

Larry stiffened a little and then relaxed with a rueful smile. After all, his secret was no secret from the pink little man before him. Besides, the question was not impertinently asked: it sprang from a very real interest in the two of them.

'I haven't been so foolish as to say or do anything,' he said. 'I've seen too closely how she regards me. I'm still just Larry Maynard to her — and I'm afraid to take a chance yet. I can't afford to lose.' His reticence relaxed as he talked for he was aching for a confidant and Grider's look was very kindly. 'I don't know. I look at Mrs. Yates and Mary Ruth sometimes and wonder if I'm not — not, well, trying to pass too great a gulf. After all, I'm still Larry Maynard who used to drive a buggy for Cap'n Yates.'

'I'll bet she ——'

'You kind of forget it when you get away from here, but when you come back it seems mighty strong. It's a big jump between a tenant house and the Home Place.'

'For a man that's got as much sense as you, you can be as foolish as a nigger,' Grider interrupted. 'I'll bet Mary Ruth thinks you're about the biggest thing that ever walked on two legs. And I'll bet she ain't got no idee about how you feel about her. You can't give up ——'

Larry's gray eyes opened and his twisted smile appeared. 'I don't have any notion of giving up, sir,' he said. 'I — I guess I'll have to find out for sure some of these days, but first I'm going to make a go of this plantation.'

'I ain't a mite worried. 'Course I don't mean to say she's in love with you. But if you can't get that girl while you're livin' in the same house with her, doin' a job that she couldn't do and relievin' her of all the worry, then you don't deserve to have her.'

Larry was plainly uncomfortable; it shocked his reticences to have his inmost dream thus paraded in the garish open and he shrank away from it sensitively.

'All right, sir. We'll let it go like that for a while.' He rose. 'I've got to be getting back to the place.'

Larry was walking across the courthouse square when he heard a hail behind him and turned to find Joe Kileskie beckoning to him from a group of men on the sidewalk. Kileskie was a short, excitable man with black hair that burst away from his long, narrow face. And his German ancestry was still discernible in his tongue though he was Lebanon born and bred.

Trailed by the others, Kileskie came up to him. 'Mr. Larry Maynard, a good-morning I wish you. With you we would talk.'

Larry nodded good-humoredly to the others, whom he recognized. Afton Gilchrist . . . Rob Wilmot . . . Horatius Parker . . . all of them operating stores in Lebanon. 'All right, sir, shoot.'

Kileskie flapped a hand toward the others. 'We have talked of you and now we would talk to you.'

'Yes, but not here on the street,' interrupted Afton Gilchrist's pleasant voice. 'Come on over to Clint Mays's drugstore an' let's get a drink. We can talk better sittin' down.'

'Yes, and he doesn't mean the kind of drink that bounces when you throw it down,' laughed Parker. 'Best we can do is sarsaparilla.'

There was a laugh, and Larry moved away with them in the direction of the drugstore. He was wondering a little. Young Wilmot — he was thirty-five and not so young — alone had kept silent. His blue eyes were smoldering and his thin, angular face was cold. Larry had met him only casually through contact with his father, Major Dave Wilmot.

Larry thought their laughter a little too hearty once they were settled about the marble-topped table in Clint Mays's drugstore. There was something awkward about their cordiality and the quick insistence with which each thrust forward the money for the drinks.

There was an awkward pause, broken by Kileskie, who blurted out:

'Mr. Maynard, for why do you buy your goods for your plantation in stores from here away?' His little black eyes snapped and he ran both hands through his hair until it stood erect.

'Yes, that's what we'd like to ask you.' This from Wilmot in a voice of studied courtesy.

Larry stared at them. Such a question was the last thing he had expected.

'Why — why, because it's cheaper,' he answered. 'I can save money for my owners by buying at wholesale prices.'

Kileskie agitated his hair. 'You have no pride in your town,' he shrilled. 'You send your money somewheres else to work. The folks at home you should favor with your business.'

'Sure,' Larry agreed, looking around at the others. 'Other things being equal I'll buy at home every time.' He saw endorsement of Kileskie's words in the other faces. Wilmot's eyes were cold. 'You fellows know what I'm trying to do,' Larry argued. 'I'm cutting every corner I can. I can get anywhere from twenty to thirty-five per cent discount by buying wholesale in Selma. I haven't got any right to do anything else.'

Kileskie held stubbornly to his point. 'The others and myself we have talked it over. Every year I do business with Mis' Mary Ruth an' we love her very much. It is good for her; it is good for me. Yes.'

'So good for her,' commented Larry dryly, 'that she went broke in three years.'

'We aren't to blame for that, Larry,' said Gilchrist earnestly. 'We can't operate her plantation for her. But Kileskie is right. Try to look at things from our viewpoint for a moment. I am speaking for the merchants here generally now. If all of the plantation owners followed your ideas we would be pretty well done for.'

Kileskie was irrepressible. 'If all were like you we would be smashed. Like that!' He spat his hands together sharply. 'No! No! The place for you to buy is in Lebanon. Me? I do not say yes, though in bargains I have always been willing to listen to reason. But in Lebanon.'

Larry saw they were tremendously in earnest and he bent forward placatingly. 'I'm willing to grant that there's a lot in what you say, but don't forget that I'm only a hired man put down here to do a job as efficiently as I can. You all will benefit by it in the long run.'

Gilchrist persisted diplomatically. 'But we men who are in Lebanon deserve some consideration. Do the years that we have extended favors to the cotton growers mean nothing? When a plantation has a little cash, are we to be the first ones to be penalized? When you — and by you I mean plantation owners in general — want favors and credit for which you have no security you come to us. Now when the shoe is on the other foot don't you think that should be taken into consideration? I'm taking the county as a whole and I'm willing to admit that we are chiefly interested in what you do because of the example that it sets the remainder of the county. The county is feeding you. It will make you rich, I think. And it seems to me that there is a duty you owe to the county.'

Larry was silent a moment, marshalling his thoughts. Rob Wilmot's cold voice cut into the silence.

'What's the use of arguing with the man about obligations, Gilchrist?' Wilmot said clearly. 'He doesn't know what the word means. Poor white trash never do.'

Larry sat for a moment in paralyzed silence and then rose slowly to his feet, his face suddenly hard. Wilmot had not moved in his chair and his cold eyes met Larry's squarely. Larry bent toward him.

'Do you realize what you have said?' he demanded.

'Yes,' answered Wilmot coolly. 'Do you object to the truth?'

Larry's eyes turned to Gilchrist and Parker. 'And do you gentlemen feel like that?' he asked courteously.

Gilchrist shifted uneasily in his seat. 'Dammit, Larry, the thing's pretty serious with us. That isn't the way to put it and ——'

'Good-afternoon,' said Larry.

'Wait a minute. Don't go off ——'

'Good-afternoon.' Larry was yards away by then. Kileskie came running after him, his black hair bristling.

'It is not wise that you should ——'

Larry closed the door behind him carefully. As he walked up the street blood sang in his ears.

That night Rob Wilmot wandered into Evan Shelby's office. Shelby glanced up as he came in and went on with his work.

Wilmot sat down and smoked for a time in

silence. 'You ought to have been in the drugstore to-day,' he said at last.

Shelby grunted uninterestedly.

'Maynard was in there. He and Gilchrist and Parker. They were talking about his buying in Selma.'

Shelby was listening now.

'Something you said the other day gave me an idea,' Wilmot went on slowly. 'I put in a word or two.' He laughed unpleasantly.

Shelby looked at him inquiringly.

'He won't be so friendly with the county in future, I don't think.'

'What happened?'

Wilmot told him, a sneer in his voice. Shelby listened in silence, and then nodded in approval.

'Much obliged. I'll remember it at the proper time.'

Rob Wilmot owed Shelby seven thousand dollars, secured by a mortgage on his store. There were many men in Aarons County like that.

CHAPTER XII

MARY RUTH stood on tiptoe among the flowers in the garden of the Big House and sniffed the air, separating and appraising each odor even to the fresh warm smell from the newly ploughed fields.

Beside her Larry walked with downbent head and steps that dragged a little. He had tried to get away right after supper but Mary Ruth would not have it. She had suggested a walk among the flowers and he could not refuse. He wanted to refuse, for he craved solitude that he might readjust his perspective and smother the hurt that gnawed at him fiercely. He wanted to be alone that he might think without interruption, and the presence of the shimmering little figure at his side merely intensified his pain, for she was part of it.

Rob Wilmot's brutal words had been as unexpected as a blow — and had hurt worse. If it had come when he first returned to Lebanon, Larry would have been prepared and would not have been surprised. That was more or less what he had expected. But under the welcome that had been extended him he had thawed and had put aside his armor of reserve. Finding friendship he had returned it eagerly and had accepted it unquestioningly.

He had been too confiding, he told himself fiercely. He should have known better. He had encountered

the caste system in other parts of the world and had seen it crush men as strong as he. His lips twisted in bitter lines as he thought and he did not see that Mary Ruth glanced at him from time to time nor did he realize that the huge moon in the eastern sky made his face an open book.

He had been living in a house of cards and Rob Wilmot's words had brought it tumbling about his ears. *That* was how they thought of him down underneath and it had required only a moment of irritation to bring it to the surface.

Poor white trash! The phrase ate into him like acid.

Was that how Mary Ruth thought of him? Suppose he had presumed on her kindness. . . . God! He couldn't have stood that. His hands clenched and his lips pressed together tight. His eyes half-closed, he looked out over the fields before him with a twisted smile on his lips.

The earth and the fullness thereof! The phrase had rung in his heart as a beacon since boyhood. The earth was true; the soil was honest; what one put into it, it gave back a hundredfold.

He was roused by the feel of Mary Ruth's hand on his arm. The intimacy of their contact hurt, for his mental poise was gone and with every thought he tortured himself.

Mary Ruth leaned close and peered up at him in the semi-darkness. 'What is wrong?' she asked.

'Nothing,' he answered.

'If you do not wish to tell me, I beg your pardon

for seeming to intrude.' Mary Ruth's reproof was very gentle.

God help him, he did want to tell her! Always he had been sufficient unto himself. He had nursed his own sorrows and cured his own griefs. But this was something that — it was different. He felt an insane desire to bury his head on her shoulder and beg to be comforted as he had done with his mother when he was a boy. He was torn between divergent emotions. He longed for the comfort of her touch and he quivered away from the thought of a fresh wound to his pride.

Mary Ruth stopped and faced him where the moon, shining through the branches of the pear trees, threw mottled shadows on the ground. There was a new note in her voice when she spoke.

'You are suffering. Won't a friendly and understanding listener help? I'm very sorry.'

'Something happened that I wasn't expecting,' he said. 'I — I suppose I cared more than I should.'

She came close and looked up at him. 'Cannot you tell me?' There was unconscious emphasis on her pronoun.

For a long moment Larry stared at her. There was something almost hypnotic in the intensity of his gaze. Then he began to speak. He told his story in blunt phrases and with an undertone of jibing in his voice.

'Is that all?' Mary Ruth asked when he had finished.

'All! Why — why, yes.'

'Surely not, Larry.'

'It's all that matters.'

'Is it? Somehow, your face tells a different story. This — was bad enough, but not so bad as to cause you to — to feel as you do. What else happened, Larry?' she probed very gently.

Abruptly the flood gates opened. Mary Ruth listened, her eyes absently gazing across the fields where the moon made mysterious shadows and created illimitable distances. Once she reached out and laid a hand on his. She let it remain.

'Rob Wilmot isn't Aarons County, nor even Lebanon,' she said when he had finished.

He laughed shortly. 'No. Of course not. But he's a representative. Let me step on somebody else's toes and you'll see.'

He had regained control of himself. The talking had calmed him and he no longer felt his throat filled. He resumed his aloof manner, save that now there was a jeer in his voice. Mary Ruth winced at the sound of it.

'You mustn't be bitter,' she said.

'I'm not, only — oh, well, it doesn't matter what I feel.'

Mary Ruth looked at him keenly. 'Are you willing to face an issue squarely?'

'Certainly.'

'May I speak of this one?'

'Why not?'

He smiled but there was little mirth in it. Mary Ruth considered him appraisingly, wondering how

far she could venture in his present mood. As for Rob Wilmot, she'd have something to say to Major Dave about that. As if he had any right . . . She chose her words carefully.

'Lebanon doesn't keep up the county, as they said, of course. But Lebanon does contribute to the county in a way that I doubt if you'd understand.'

'I understand business, all right.' Larry's tone was velvety. 'And it's poor business to pay them twenty per cent that I can save by buying in Selma.'

'Yes, I know.' Mary Ruth argued earnestly. 'But still there is something to be said for them. You've been away from home for a long time and you've forgotten some things about the Black Belt.'

'That's true,' he agreed enigmatically. 'I am striving to remedy the condition.'

When she spoke her words startled Larry and shook him out of his bitterness. 'I would not venture to say this, only — only I think I know why you have come back to Lebanon. You have been so good to Mother and me that I — I don't want to see you do anything that would make things harder for you. It is only because I think it may help you.'

'And you want to help?'

'Yes,' she answered simply. 'Very much.'

She was puzzled at his tone. 'You have. More than you know.' He stirred the rose bushes with his toe. 'I am curious. You say you know why I came back to Lebanon. Tell me what you think.'

This was more than she had bargained for, but she did not flinch the issue. 'I think you see more

in this than merely getting Cade-Reynolds cheap cotton,' she said slowly. 'You are trying to help the people of the county as well. I thought it at first, but when you began work on your warehouse, I knew. You are trying to do a very big thing.'

There was a little thrill in Larry's voice. He had not expected this. 'What am I trying to do?'

'Do you think I have not seen? You are trying to show these people where they have made their mistakes in the past. You found the county poor and in debt. You want to show them a new way of living so that it cannot happen again. You — you — I don't exactly know how to say it. I can feel it if I can't put it into words very well. You're trying to change the whole system of growing cotton. You believe it can be done and you've come among us to try and give us the benefit of what you have learned. I — you — eventually you hope to see the whole South follow Aarons County. You are trying to make over the manner of living of a whole section of the country.'

Larry swallowed; he did not dare look at her. How had she known? Why — why, he hadn't even admitted to himself some of the things he hoped to do, for his dreams had not been confined to Aarons County. She was speaking again.

'I've wanted to tell you that I understood for a long time. That's why I don't want to see you — hurt yourself. You're not going to, are you?'

'Sometimes we can't help it. And I'm human, you know.'

'But you must help it. It's too big a thing to be hindered by little petty jealousies and feeling.'

'Do you think they are petty?'

She gestured scornfully. 'Of course! It's what a man does that counts. I've stood in a man's place and I know. A man's work speaks for itself.'

'And — and I?'

'You should be proud of yours.'

She was a brave little figure in the moonlight, her head thrown back and her eyes fastened on his face. Larry questioned her again.

'You're sure of that?'

'Very sure.'

'I shall remind you of your words, perhaps,' he said quietly.

CHAPTER XIII

BACK in the parlor, Larry motioned her to sit across from him in one of the scrollwork rockers upholstered in turkey-red plush. He was master of himself now.

‘Won’t you explain a little more? I — I suppose I was over-sensitive, but that doesn’t matter. What I really want to do is understand. When one understands . . .’ He spread his hands and did not finish the sentence.

‘You mean about Mr. Gilchrist and the others?’ Mary Ruth was glad that his face was clearer, but she was still disquieted by the look in his eyes. She feared that the calm was on the surface only. ‘You see, it’s like this. Lebanon has kept up the county as you’d know if you’d think a minute. Who supplies the food to the farmers when they haven’t any money? The most of them, that is. Mr. Gilchrist and the others at Lebanon. Who lends them money to make their crops? The merchants at Lebanon. And they do much more. I’ve known Mr. Kileskie to carry a man as long as three years when he had misfortune. The farmers couldn’t make a crop without them. And the negroes depend on them, too. You see, not every plantation has a store like we do. Most of the places stand good for their negroes, but they never pay their bills until the cotton is ginned and sold and in the meantime

Mr. Gilchrist and the others have to let them use the money. Do you see how it is?’

‘Go on.’

‘Well, that’s why Mr. Gilchrist and Mr. Kileskie and the others feel that all the farmers ought to come to them to buy their goods and not send their money off to Selma. That’s how they manage to make money themselves, because they really do a big trade. And they don’t understand when they see you buying in Selma even if you can buy a little cheaper. They think you owe it to Lebanon to return the favors that Lebanon has done the county. Don’t you see?’

‘There’s something to be said for them. I’m glad you told me. It makes things a little more understandable.’

‘Then you’ll buy in Lebanon?’

Larry shook his head. ‘I’m sorry, but I don’t see how I can,’ he said regretfully. ‘It wouldn’t be fair to Cade-Reynolds and if I did that it wouldn’t prove how cheaply cotton can be raised. I can’t do it. I’ve got to squeeze every dollar for every cent’s value I can. I sympathize with Gilchrist and Kileskie and — and the rest of them. But business is business and I’ve an obligation to my firm.’

‘I’m sorry.’ She sighed. ‘It — it isn’t going to be particularly pleasant for you at Lebanon because all the merchants will feel the same.’

‘I suppose that I’ll just have to stand it.’

Mary Ruth saw a change in him from that day and she sorrowed over it. Larry’s aloofness re-

turned. He ceased going to St. John's with them on Sundays; he declined to accompany them to homes of the county gentry where he had been made welcome. Taciturn, outwardly unemotional, he threw himself with redoubled energy into the task of managing the plantation.

Men came to visit Larry, but they found him hidden behind the reserve of a flawless courtesy. Where once he had been eagerly friendly he was now merely polite. They sensed the difference and without understanding why gradually ceased their visits.

Larry was lonely and he sought to ease his pain by absorption in the plantation labor. But he was not happy.

Spring came early that year and frost was soon driven out of the ground under the rays of the sun. Larry had gambled and he had won. When the fields of his neighbors were still dark from freshly ploughed furrows there were already faint lines of green in his own where the cotton plants were pushing up to answer the call of the sun.

Fortune smiled on Larry. The rains held off until he had time to attend to his re-planting — not that much of it was necessary, for he had excited the horror of Grider again by buying pedigreed seed from a North Carolina nursery.

'I've heard tell of pedigreed horses an' dogs an' hogs an' cattle,' said Grider when Larry told him. 'But this is the first time I ever heard of pedigreed cotton seed.'

Larry laughed at the scorn in his voice and argued tolerantly. 'The same thing holds true for seed as for cattle and horses. Breeding tells, whether it's in plants or people.'

And when planting time was over Larry's extravagance was justified, for he had virtually no re-planting to do. Only here and there was there a gap in the green rows where the young cotton plants opened their two tiny green leaves and prospered amazingly.

Then came the spring rains and the cotton appeared to grow by inches overnight. In the neighboring fields seed rotted in the ground and failed to germinate with the sun hidden and the warm winds coming up from the south. But Larry's plants were too far advanced for the seasoning to hurt them.

When the rains ceased, Larry ordered out his crew of cotton choppers a full three weeks before the fields of his neighbors were ready.

He gave the orders that night at the store. Here he and Grimes and Sellers met each night after the stock had been fed and planned the work for the following day. Farley usually lent an ear and Larry was pleased with his interest.

'We'll start chopping to-morrow,' said Larry. 'I've sent word through the quarters and all the women are ready. We'd better work 'em in gangs of thirty. Work the men and the women separate and they'll do twice as much. Grimes, you'd better pass the word that you'll work the women in the north fields and Sellers will take the men to the east.

We ought to be through in three weeks. We've got to be or the cotton will get a setback. It's growing too fast to be hindered now because the plants are too close together. Leave the plants about fourteen inches apart.'

Grimes, a stocky youth with a cast in his left eye and a cheek that bulged perpetually, nodded and said nothing, but Farley expressed surprise.

'Fourteen inches! Why everybody else down here is havin' 'em twenty-four inches apart. You'll stunt 'em sure.'

'No, I won't,' Larry answered. 'That's one thing I get from the fertilizer you thought I was wasting. I can support a third more plants to the acre and get more bolls to the plant. That's what fertilizer will do besides pushing your plants.'

Larry stooped to light a cigarette at the lamp and Farley nodded significantly at Sellers, who got up and went out. Larry returned to his seat.

'That's one way I expect to get my additional lint. You thought I meant to depend on more bolls, but I'm working both. Grimes, you want to see that none of your plants are more than fourteen inches now. That's not quite two widths of the hoe. Your women will soon get used to it.'

'All right, sir,' agreed Grimes and went out.

Farley, too, put on his cap. 'Guess I'll go get a bite to eat.'

Larry nodded absently. 'All right. You needn't come back. I'll close up. I've got to enter these time books before I call it a day.'

Farley's departing footsteps fell on unheeding ears. Larry, buried in the time book, hummed absently. He did not lift his head when a negro stood in the doorway and looked at him. Behind the negro there was the vague outline of a shadowy figure that disappeared in a moment.

The negro cleared his throat and shuffled his feet. Still Larry did not look up. Then he spoke.

'Cap'n, I'd like to see you a minit, please, suh.'

Larry recognized him. He was Joe Brinson, a new-comer to the place. He had been eager to stretch his account at the store beyond the limits fixed by Larry and had resented Larry's refusal to permit this.

Larry rose and sauntered toward him, but he came confidently into the store. Larry kept his hands in his pockets, but he was poised.

'You want to see me? Want some more stuff, I suppose? Well you can't ——'

'Nossuh, Cap'n, you's gittin' on too fas'.' Brinson's nostrils opened and closed. He was a mulatto and there was a scar across his face that was a reminder of a past fight. Larry did not like him and had regretted hiring him, but he was a good field hand and there had been no sufficient reason for discharging him.

'All right, then. What is it?'

'I come to tell you I was leavin'.'

'Leaving! What the hell are you leaving for now just when I need men most? You can't leave. You owe a bill at the commissary. The law says ——'

'Yassuh, I knows how it is wid a nigger an' a white man, Cap'n. But I'se leavin' jus' the same an' I come up here to find out how much I owe at the sto'.'

Larry flipped open a ledger and ran his finger down a column of figures. 'I let you get in pretty deep,' he said. 'You owe us . . . um . . . forty-two dollars and seventeen cents.'

The negro stepped up to the counter and pulled a purse from his pocket. 'That ain't skacely nothin' a-tall,' he said, and counted out the exact change.

Larry did not attempt to argue. He was not greatly desirous of keeping him and he wrote him a receipt without comment.

'When I gits on the train wid dis,' Brinson volunteered, 'the law cain't git me.'

He walked out leaving Larry wondering. He had seen a roll of bills in that purse. One man more or less didn't make such a great difference, but . . .

He was uneasy as he walked up to the Big House and he didn't shake it off until he and Mary Ruth were again alone in the parlor, where she renewed her efforts to soothe the hurt that she knew was rankling and poisoning Larry's thoughts.

CHAPTER XIV

LARRY pushed his choppers, setting them tasks that kept them working from daylight until dark and then offering a small bonus for extra work.

This was the critical time for the cotton. It had been planted by the cultivators as thick as the seeds fell from the hoppers and now that most of them had germinated they must be thinned down that they might grow sturdy and thrive on the rich food that had been put at their roots.

But two thousand acres is a lot of cotton and even with Larry's driving persistence progress was not as rapid as he would have liked. Despite this he drew men from the choppers and set the first ploughs following behind the hoes. He was pushing his crop as he had told Grider.

He calculated a little anxiously that he would have no time to spare if his cotton was not to suffer. An able-bodied negro man can hoe an acre of cotton in a day if he keeps steadily at his work. A woman can do nearly as well.

Larry had a hundred and fifteen hoes at work in his two gangs when the work started, but this number was variable, for not all the women could work every day and the men sometimes sneaked off for a day. Larry knew that the number would dwindle as the chopping progressed. He figured

that he would be fortunate if he averaged a hundred hoes.

This meant that over three weeks would be required to cover his two thousand acres of cotton. Larry frowned at the result of his calculation: the weather, too, must enter into it. If it rained it meant a delay of two or three days because they could not work in the fields with the ground wet.

He needed more labor. He could have gotten it if he had bid for it, but he refrained for by now his neighbors were in the midst of their re-planting and needed every hand they could get. He smiled ironically at his own forbearance. But he followed the unwritten law of the Black Belt and did not.

His face was a little anxious as he marked the work of the gangs. Every day's delay meant that much more fertilizer gone to waste through the drain of the useless plants that would be cut down by the choppers. And this fertilizer he had depended on as a reservoir to care for the heavier planting of cotton he had ordered.

But the work progressed and he was forced to be content. He had no great cause for worry. He had been able to get more out of his workers than other plantation owners could have done, for he paid them in money and he set a definite task for each worker.

The first Saturday night after chopping started he made his heaviest draft at Lebanon for his payroll for the chopping amounted to more than six hundred dollars.

He handled the transaction with characteristic

understanding of the negro's character. At sundown Buck Farley beat with a hammer on a ploughshare hung from a wire on the porch of the store. It was a call that summoned every negro on the place. It was hardly needed for word had been passed that they would get their pay on Saddy evenin'.

Farley, with the help of Grimes and Sellers, formed them in line and sent them into the store one at a time. There they found Larry behind a table on which were stacks of bills and silver.

After they started paying off Farley returned to stand by the Cap'n with the store account book in his hand. Instead of himself taking out the amount that the negro owed the store, Larry paid him in full and then Farley produced his bill and the negro paid it all, if it was only for the current week, or at least some on account.

This was a trick that Larry had learned in India, where he had found that native workmen were twice as contented when allowed themselves to settle their small accounts at the company's bazaar.

It was a wearisome business and dark had fallen before Larry leaned back with a sigh. 'I guess that's the last one,' he said to Farley. 'That's some job. All of them seemed satisfied.'

'Yes, suh. I reckon they did. It ain't hardly healthy for niggers not to be satisfied in the Black Belt.'

Farley had time only for a word or two for the negroes lingered in the store. They were unaccustomed to the feel of real money in their pockets and

they spent recklessly. The store's stock of cheap candy went first; then the last of the sardines; then the cakes and the soda-water. Farley called in Grimes and Sellers to help wait on the trade.

One or two negroes stood apart from the crowd and eyed Larry. When they saw that he had finished they approached him with caps in their hands. Judd Gillis was their spokesman.

'Cap'n, us gwine leave,' he stated simply. 'Does us owes you anything?'

Larry sat up abruptly. There were six men with Judd and he saw with dismay that all of them were excellent workmen.

He attempted argument. 'What's the matter, Judd?'

'Nothin' 'tall, suh. We jus' craves to git where we gwine.'

'You're going to leave right in the middle of chopping time?'

'Yassuh, Cap'n. Us is scairt they won't wait for us ef we don't.'

'Any complaint about the way you've been treated here?'

'Nossuh.'

'Have I worked you too hard?'

'Nossuh, 'tain't dat.'

'Then what is it?'

Judd shifted uneasily and looked everywhere but at Larry. Over his face descended the blankness of stupidity and Larry knew that he would get nothing further from him, but he tried for a clue to their

reasons for this desertion. He moved by indirection.

'Taking your family, Judd?'

'Yassuh, us all is gwine.'

'What does Chaney think of that?'

'She's jus' plumb tickled, suh.'

'Where are you going, Judd?'

'To Bummin'ham, suh.'

'Birmingham.'

'Yassuh. I is. Some of dese is gwine to Chicaw-go. Ike, he's gwine to Dee-troit. Us is jus' gwine to move out. Us been waitin' for a time when us didn't owe nothin' at the commissary 'fore we could go.'

'What are you going to do in Birmingham, Judd?'

'I aims to dig coal, suh. Dey tells me dere's some niggers up dere makin' as much as a hundred dollar a munt — ev'ry munt.'

There was nothing to do except take their money and let them go. None of them owed anything of consequence to the plantation. They had worked out their debt carried over from the previous year.

Larry stared after them reflectively. He hoped nobody else would get the itch to leave the plantation. He was not greatly surprised. He knew that when the industrial plants of Alabama ran short of labor they turned to the reservoir of the Black Belt and lured the negro from the farm with the promise of steady work and large wages.

If more of his men left it would complicate his problem and push him even closer to the margin of

safety. He wondered if there was a labor agent from Birmingham in Lebanon. That Sunday he rode into the town to see, but could discover no stranger there. He went back Monday for he had to visit the bank anyway. There he inquired of Grider, to whom all news of the little town filtered. But Grider had heard nothing.

'Now, then, you're beginnin' to play hell,' said Grider. 'Don't you know you can't pay a nigger money an' keep him workin'? Give him a dollar an' he won't do a thing but sleep till he's eaten up that dollar an' one he's borried.'

'I don't believe it and I wouldn't do business that way if I did.'

'I know,' said Grider placidly. 'You've been up east an' got yourself all tangled up with damn Yankee notions about the Brother in Black. Brother, hell! The only brother a nigger has is a ox an' you have to treat him that way!'

'Did it ever strike you that that attitude is one reason the negro is so anxious to get away from the farm and into industrial work? They don't talk that way about him in Birmingham. I've seen the negro work when he was paid an adequate wage and he made a reliable workman. I'll tell you this. I'd a damn sight rather deal with negroes than with the scum you get up east from Europe. They're cleaner, they're decenter, and if their skins are black they aren't black inside.'

'Well, well, we won't argue about it. I don't know much about furriners. The only one we ever had in

Aarons County was that Chinaman that come in here an' opened up a laundry.' Grider chuckled at the memory. 'He never lasted long. The nigger wimmin run him out of business. Do you know what you ought to have done?'

'No, what?'

'You ought to of worked 'em on shares and then bought their shares from 'em in tradin' out an' feedin' and advancin' to them. Then they couldn't of left.'

'You mean the crop law?'

'Yeah. Section 8814 of the Code of 1923 of the State of Alabama makes it unlawful for a tenant to leave a plantation while he's in debt to the owner an' while his crop is growin'. If you'd done that you could have made 'em stay.'

'But that's slavery!'

'There's more than one way of killin' a dog,' observed Grider dryly, 'than chokin' him to death with butter.'

Larry seemed to find the answer sufficient. 'He's scared to move, I suppose. The law will get him. That's what the man meant the other day. I never thought of that. Well, that doesn't fit in with my idea of the way I want to grow my cotton.'

'I know. But when you've been handlin' niggers 's long as I have you'll find I ain't so far wrong.'

'When I find that,' said Larry crisply as he rose to go, 'I'll quit trying to grow cotton and go back to selling it.'

Four more men left the following week. The

routine was the same. They appeared at the store, asked how much they owed, paid in full, and left. The whole plantation seemed infected with the itching foot.

The chopping slowed down under the steady diminution in the number of workers. Every man took a woman with him and thus the place lost two hands. Nor did Larry find it possible to hire new men. Other plantations were busy chopping cotton and the applications to him suddenly dropped off. He did not attempt to rob his neighbors of their labor.

His face grew haggard and he grew irritable. But Buck Farley's ease grew with Larry's petulance.

'What in hell's behind it?' asked Larry of Farley. 'You've been on the place. You ought to know.'

'Niggers is like that,' said Farley philosophically. 'They're jus' like sheep. You let the old he-ram git a notion he wants to go over a fence an' the whole dam flock 'll go right after him. Niggers is like that.'

'We've got to stop it,' said Larry. 'That's certain. I could understand it if some other plantation were hiring them. I've heard of labor raided between plantations before and it usually ended in gun-play.'

'Yes, suh,' agreed Farley, 'stealin' tenants ain't exactly healthy in the Black Belt.'

But they did not stop it. Scarcely a day passed that a negro did not present himself and leave the place. Nor could Larry extract from them any reason for their going. They assumed the mask of stolid ignorance and neither cajolery nor storming could wring from them the reason of their going.

They seemed to have been stricken with the fever for the industrial cities of Alabama, and Birmingham was the magnet that drew them.

'Y'see, suh, it's like this,' Farley explained smoothly. 'Them what's gone on ahead writes back to their folks an' tells 'em to come on an' they fixes up a place for 'em and gits 'em a job where they're workin'. That's the hell of a thing like this gittin' started.'

Larry shook his head and went out to squeeze an extra row from the cotton choppers. He was badly behind with his schedule and his cotton was suffering. He had expected to see his fields chopped in three weeks. At this rate it would be nearer five.

He tried to get labor outside the county and failed. Throughout the State all hands were busy in the fields. This was the season of greatest demand and on some places even the children were swinging a hoe from sunup to dark. But this was on the places where the tenants worked on shares.

Larry thought and thought but he could get no clue. It was so intangible. These negroes were free agents. If they wished to leave and had the money to do so there was nothing he could do to stop them.

He looked up wearily as a negro entered the store. He recognized the signs and reached for his cash book even before the man spoke.

'You owe us thirty-eight dollars and forty-two cents, Albert,' he said. 'You're leaving, I suppose.'

'Yassuh. My wife's cousin in Bummin'ham, he done wrote us to come on an' I guess I'll go.'

'No use asking you why you're going, I suppose?'

'I just craves to go where they is at.'

Larry shrugged wearily. 'Oh, hell. You're all the same.' Farley was busy, and he extended his hand. 'All right, give me the money and I'll write you a receipt. This is for last year, you know.'

The negro placed a crisp, new fifty-dollar bill in his hand. It had never even been creased save where the negro had folded it. Larry stared down at the yellow currency.

'Where'd you get money like that, Bert?' he asked.

'I sold that old mule that my wife's daddy had,' the negro said stolidly.

Larry eyed him for a moment. He knew that no such animal existed, but he made no comment. Instead he wrote a receipt for the negro and returned to the chair.

He took the bill from his pocket and fell to studying it. He was puzzled. Where had the negro got it and how? It was a new gold certificate. Bert Milton had never had a fifty-dollar bill in his life except at settling time. Where had he gotten them? He looked closer. The serial number was X20178. The bill was not long out of the bank. He paused at the thought. The bank. Obviously this money was fresh from the bank.

He rose, took his hat from a peg and spoke to Farley. 'I'm going out for a while. You'd better close up because I don't think I'll be back until dark.'

He made Lebanon as fast as the rackety little flivver would take him. Once there he went directly to Henry Grider's office.

'I want to find out something,' he said without preamble. 'Do you recognize this bill?'

He threw the new gold certificate before Grider and the banker picked it up. 'Why . . . no . . . Don't know as I do.' He scanned it closer. 'There ain't nothing the matter with it.'

'I know it, but don't you suppose it passed through your bank?'

'It might of. We give out most of the new money here in town.'

'Would there be any way of your telling?'

'There might. Wait a minute.' He waddled to the door and lifted his voice. 'Oh, Sam, come in here a minute.' He went back to his desk and when the gray-headed cashier came in he pointed out the bill.

'Have you had any of those new bills come in here lately?'

The cashier picked up the bill and turned it in his fingers. 'Why, yes, sir. This is part of the last shipment from the Federal Reserve Branch at Birmingham.'

'Do you recognize that?'

'Not positive, sir. Wait a minute, though, maybe I can tell.'

He went out, taking the bill with him. In a moment he came back with a thin book. 'Yes, sir. It happens that I can.'

'Who got it?' demanded Larry.

The cashier looked at Grider, who nodded for him to go ahead.

'That bill was one of ten we issued to Mr. Evan Shelby day before yesterday morning.'

Larry held his face impassive with an effort. Grider spoke slowly:

'Let's be sure about that. How do you know?'

'Well, sir, when these fifties came they were in bundles of twenty. I put the other packs in the vault and only opened one of the bundles. I recorded the first serial number of the lot and the last as I always do.'

'And this bill?'

'That was one of the numbers that went to Mr. Shelby. I know because I didn't break the bundle until I got his check. I remember it because he told me particularly how he wanted the money. Some was in ones, some in fives, some in tens, a lot in twenties and ten fifties. He didn't want any silver at all. I thought ——'

'That's all,' said Grider and when the cashier had gone he turned to Larry.

'That what you wanted to know?'

'Yes,' answered Larry. 'It clears up a lot of things that have been puzzling me. I wonder what the connection is between Evan Shelby and a coal mine in Birmingham.'

He rose and went to the door, but Grider stopped him.

'Ain't you goin' to tell me what it's all about?'

'Later, perhaps, when I come back.'

'Where are you goin'?'

'Out to Evan Shelby's plantation. It's on the River Road, isn't it?'

CHAPTER XV

A CLOUD of dust rose above the cedar trees that fringed the road leading from the Demopolis Pike along the railroad to the Big House at the Yates plantation. It lifted up in billowing clouds that settled slowly in the sultry air of the June morning.

Standing on the steps of the plantation store, Larry Maynard eyed it speculatively and chuckled. He had been waiting for that dust more than a week and now his patience was rewarded.

He stood with one foot propped on the railing about the narrow verandah, elbow on knee, chewing reflectively on a sliver of broomsedge that he had picked from the sleeve of his khaki shirt. He knew what the dust cloud portended and he was pondering how to make the most of the opportunity that presently would be his.

He did not change his position when an automobile whose metal work flashed in the sun turned around the cedar trees and headed past the Big House. He watched it impassively as it slackened for the ruts before the stables and then picked its way carefully along to the front of the store where it halted and a negro sprang out to open the door for the monstrous form of Evan Shelby.

Shelby's face fired at the sight of Larry's quiet figure and he sprang forward with an amazing agility for a man of his size.

'I come out here for a showdown with you,' he said, the wattles under his jaw quivering and his face turning the muddy white of a fish's belly.

Larry stared down at him: he had determined that he would not lose his temper. It would be easier with Shelby in a towering rage. Anger in other men always made Larry calmer. He had found it profitable.

He stared down at Shelby for a full minute before he answered him.

'Come up on the porch out of the sun,' he said. 'You'll have a stroke if you stand out there.' He raised his voice. 'Steve!'

'Yassuh,' from within.

'Bring Cap'n Shelby a drink of cold water. Go to the well and draw it.'

'Yassuh. Right now.'

All these amenities were offered coolly. Shelby maintained a baleful silence. He sat and mopped his face and as fast as his handkerchief passed over the flesh fresh moisture burst out behind.

'Why didn't you come in when I sent word I wanted to see you?'

Larry eyed him and said nothing. At the moment Steve came around the corner of the porch with a bucket of water. Shelby drank thirstily and threw the dipper back into the bucket without a word of thanks.

'Listen here, Maynard,' said Shelby arrogantly. 'You can go just so far and no farther. You've come pretty near the absolute limit now. Do you know

what happens to people down here that hire other folks' niggers?'

'Why, yes, Shelby,' answered Maynard smoothly. 'I've heard that they are dealt with — er — shall we say, unofficially?'

'When they're lucky,' Shelby snapped.

'And is this an — er — unofficial visit?' Larry's voice was pleasant.

'We'll call it that. You've been hirin' my niggers.'

'Really.'

'Yes, I don't see why I didn't figger out what was the matter sooner. Took me a whole week to find out where all the niggers that was leavin' my place was goin' to.'

'Oh!'

'Best hands I've got leavin' me. Niggers I've had since I bought the place. Couldn't make it out. I was sleepin' all right. Now I want 'em back.'

'You do.'

Larry was goading him. Shelby controlled himself with a mighty effort, but the fat hands that rested on his broad knees trembled.

'Yes. I'm goin' to have 'em back or you're goin' to find yourself in almighty hot water. You've been away from down here a right smart while. Maybe you forgot how the folks handle labor thieves down here.'

'No,' said Larry softly. 'I haven't forgotten.'

'Well?'

Larry chewed his sliver of broomsedge and said

nothing. Shelby shifted his bulk in his chair and spoke impatiently.

'Listen here, I want those niggers you stole back an' I'm goin' to have 'em.'

'You said that before.'

'Will you give 'em back?'

'No.'

Shelby's chair came down to the floor with a thump and he leaned forward in his amazement.

'You got 'em, didn't you?'

'You evidently think so.'

'They're workin' on your place, ain't they?'

'Why, yes, since you mention it, I believe we did have quite a few new hands during chopping time when work was heavy. But then we'd lost a good many.'

'Hey?'

'I say we'd lost a good many.'

'What's that got to do with it?'

'Why, really, I think that's the meat of the cocoanut. If I hadn't lost mine you wouldn't have lost yours.'

'I don't know ——'

Larry looked at him and his eyes crinkled into a smile. 'Really, Shelby, did you think you were the only one who could use money?'

'I — why ——'

'Since you're so nice and tactful let's both be polite and tell the truth. Won't do you any good to tell a lie. You gave my niggers who had the moving fever money to pay them out at the store and you

paid their train fare to Birmingham, or Detroit, or Chicago, or wherever they wanted to go. That was all right if you could get away with it, but you couldn't. So I thought it was only right that you should supply the places of the niggers you had shipped off my plantation.'

Shelby was sputtering angrily. 'I don't know anything about your losing your niggers. I had nothing to do with it and you can't hide ——'

'You had nothing to do with it — oh, no. Only furnished the money. Really, Shelby, you ought not to give fifty-dollar bills to negroes who never had five dollars in their life. Besides —' Larry's voice was almost purring — 'fifty-dollar bills aren't so common in Aarons County this year that they can't be traced. Do I make myself clear?'

'So you hired my niggers?'

'Why, yes, I got what I needed. I understand that there are plenty more who would like to come. You aren't popular with your negroes, Shelby. Not any more than you are with me.'

Shelby turned his huge head and eyed Larry. There was something disconcerting in the steadiness of his gaze and in the malevolence of it.

'You won't give 'em back?'

'Why should I? They're good workers and I need them.'

'I guess you know what that means. I'm goin' to fight you for 'em.'

'If you can fight me any harder than you have been doing I shall be interested to observe your methods.'

'I can,' said Shelby simply, and Larry believed him.

'I've a little ammunition left yet myself.' Larry could bluff.

'Not much,' Shelby rumbled. 'I can stand more'n one year an' you can't. You've got to show your profit on the first year or your mill won't have nothin' more to do with you.' A chuckle shook his folds. 'I've been doin' a little private investigatin' on my own account. Your firm gave you so much money, little matter of sixty thousand dollars, I believe. An' it's up to you to sink or swim on that.'

'Which clerk up at the bank did you buy?'

'Nemmine. There's ways of findin' out things. 'Course I don't mean your mill'd throw you over an' let their sixty thousand go, but there wouldn't be no next year if you couldn't git by on that.'

Larry was startled at the accuracy of his information. Some of the things not even the people at the bank knew. He had told no one of Cade's ultimatum.

'I'm willing to gamble with you one year, Larry. But I don't mind telling you that the results of that year have got to be pretty conclusive before I'm convinced that the time is ripe yet for what you propose.'

Shelby seemed to read his mind, for he nodded, and another chuckle shook the convolutions of his gross body.

'Yeah, that's precisely what I'm goin' to do. I'm

goin' to outbid you for labor. I don't give a damn how much it costs me, but you can't afford to go too high. It runs your costs up and you've got a stop loss order on those.'

'That's your idea of war, is it?' Larry hid his disquiet.

'It is,' said Shelby definitely. 'I can afford to throw away some money to the niggers this year. Next year you'll be gone and I'll get it back. I'm going to tackle you with both feet. I been loafin' on the job.'

Larry laughed pleasantly. 'Did you ever hear the story of the fellow who climbed the sweetgum tree to shake out the coon? No? Well, I'll tell it to you. Seems the dogs had run this coon till pretty near day before he took timber. One fellow climbed the tree and there was the damnedest commotion you ever heard. The fellow on the ground hollered: "Do you want help to shake him down?" Fellow up the sweetgum didn't say anything for a minute. Then he spoke up: "Shake him down, hell!" he said, "come help me turn him loose."' Larry leaned forward and smiled right into Shelby's face. 'It wasn't a coon,' he said smoothly. 'It was a bear.'

Shelby chuckled sourly. 'Meanin' that I'll have to have help to turn you loose?'

'Figure it out for yourself.'

'I guess not.'

'You've done your talking. Now I'll do mine. I didn't start this war that you've declared. All I asked was to be let alone. Maybe you think you can

outbid me for labor. Well, maybe you can, but Henry Grider down at the bank has several affidavits that won't make nice reading in the 'Aarons County Democrat.' That'll show who started this business of bidding for negroes.

'Also, you can't use all the negroes you'll get and you can't bid only for mine. Because if you do I'll hire the first ones I can get and I won't fail to tell why I am doing it. Also and furthermore, I can get my labor cheaper than you can yours because you've got to send the people you hire from me to Birmingham or somewhere else and I just move 'em over in a wagon.'

'They won't ——'

'They won't come, you were about to say? I think they will. You thought I was a fool to treat niggers like they were human beings, but wages being equal they'd rather work for me than work for you. I haven't cheated them at the store: I haven't cheated them in the accounts and I won't cheat them at settling time. I don't have to keep them in debt to me to make them stay on the place. You do all those things and the negroes know it and the only reason they take it is because they can't help themselves. Well, I'm not expecting too much from 'em. They're only children, after all, but if I pay wages and you pay the same, I'll get the pick of the negroes.'

Larry was speaking quietly. He rather enjoyed his defiance of Shelby and was surprised at his ability to keep his temper. After all, the advantage was

his; he had not realized how much in his favor it was until he had begun to talk.

'You're in a hell of a fix,' he continued to Shelby who sat swelling up as a horse does that swallows air. 'You crowd me too hard on labor and I'll go to the county with the whole thing and I'll take what labor I need where I can get it. You can't afford to antagonize all the big plantations in the county. They don't like you any too much now and you're figuring on their help in trying to crowd me on my warehouse proposition.'

New respect was in Shelby's eyes. 'You're pretty fast on your feet. But I warned you about that.'

'I know you did, and I didn't think you were joking, either. Well, I don't know whether you can jam me on farming or not. I don't think you can, but I know you can't on the warehouse. That's a business I know. I'm not worrying about the warehouse, and I can take care of myself out here. There's one big thing you've overlooked.'

'What's that?'

'I can afford to pay more for my labor for I'm going to make more cotton this year than they did last. I can pay more than you can.' His voice grew significant and his eyes were watchful. 'Besides, I'm not going to grow all low middling on the plantation this year.'

Shelby turned his head without moving his body. His eyes were glassy. 'How come you ain't?'

'It just isn't done,' Larry answered. Suddenly an idea struck him. What a fool he had been not to

think of it before. He had been blind! Blind! Why the thing was absurd! Without a break in his sentences, though his thoughts were moving with lightning rapidity, he added: 'And besides, I'm not going to sell all my cotton to you.'

Shelby eyed him steadily. Larry's answering look was hard. 'What do you mean by that?'

'Think it over,' suggested Maynard. 'You ought to have something else to think of besides me.'

Shelby got up slowly — like a cow — before he spoke. 'Help yourself,' he said. 'If you think you can find anything, go ahead. I'll be ready for you.'

Larry watched Shelby get into his car and drive off without a backward look, but his thoughts were elsewhere. He was busy fitting the pieces of the puzzle together.

Last year this plantation had produced eight hundred bales of cotton and none of it had graded better than middling. Hadn't Mary Ruth told him that all of it had gone through Shelby's hands? She was an unexperienced girl. There were a dozen ways in which Shelby could have cheated her.

He stood, oblivious of his surroundings, pursuing his conclusion as a pointer dog does a wily old quail.

Was that why Shelby had been so anxious to get the plantation for himself? He would have allowed Mary Ruth to continue to operate it. Mary Ruth thought Shelby was her friend. Larry knew that Shelby was a friend only to Evan Shelby and that he was without conscience or scruple.

If Shelby had done what he suspected that might

explain the man's determination to remove him from the plantation and the county. Larry slapped his leg and whistled. Shelby was afraid he would find out. . . .

Elation left his face and he sobered. It was one thing to suspect and another to prove. . . . He must say nothing until he could strike.

Then his face darkened. . . . Why, damn him . . . if he had cheated Mary Ruth . . .

CHAPTER XVI

BUCK FARLEY stopped to let his horse drink where the sparkling water crossed the road just below the dam at Wilson's Mill on Wilkins's Creek.

The millhouse was just discernible through the willows and it was not until he turned his horse into the yard that he was able to identify who was at the mill by the sight of the teams or the decrepit flivvers.

He was whistling tunelessly through his teeth and his eyes brightened when he saw only one team standing lazily under the shade of a water oak and but one or two automobiles along the level space before the mill. He had purposely timed his visit when there would be few customers.

From the millhouse came the rumble of the wheel where it turned the stones that ground the corn for Aarons County. The ginhouse, standing a little back from the lake, was silent and deserted. It ran only during the fall after cotton-picking began. Ben Wilson and his brother, Ed, spent the remainder running their grist-mill where the sweet corn of the Black Belt was turned into white meal. Wilson's Waterground Grist was known as far north as Birmingham, where its sweetness made it much more in demand than the grindings of the steam mills.

The cotton-gin was run by steam, but the mill-stones were turned by a huge waterwheel geared up to a drive-shaft and operated by a lever sticking up

beside the hopper and raising or lowering the dam gates. The wheel caught the water as it poured through the spillway from the lake and turned the stones.

Farley knew the place. He had swam in the limpid water of the lake when he was a small boy. Many a perch he had pulled from the alder fringes along the south bank and his hounds had treed even the wiliest coon in the blackjacks that dotted the swamp where the creek was fed by springs running deep into the limestone fissures of the substrata.

Farley hitched his horse leisurely; took off the saddle and rubbed down the animal's back with a handful of leaves from a persimmon tree. Then he went to the millhouse where he was hailed by a man so covered with the flying particles of meal as to be hardly recognizable even to Farley until he spoke.

'Hello, Buck,' the figure hailed out of the fine dust that drifted off from where the hopper spouted meal into the sack hung below it on two nails. 'Glad t' see you. Come in an' set.'

Farley seated himself on a bin and waited until the white figure had lifted a ten-bushel sack of shelled corn and dumped it into the hopper. Then he came over with outstretched hands.

'Glad to see you. You ain't been this way for quite a spell. How you makin' it?'

'So-so, Ben. So-so. I'm managin' to get a snack now 'n then an' a place to sleep. A body cain't 'spect much more'n that in this vale of tears.'

Ben Wilson wagged his head sympathetically.

'What's eatin' you? Got some co'n you want ground?'

'No. I jus' was passin' an' thought I'd drop in an' set a little.'

'So do, so do,' invited the miller heartily. 'I do git kind of lonesome here in the off-season an' we ain't had much grindin' this spring. Seems like most all the co'n was bought up by a feller named Maynard for feed an' we ain't had much work.'

'Yeah. I know. I works for him. He got it damn cheap, too. That was 'cause everybody was hard up an' didn't have no money. I knowed 'em that sold their stock and their feed an' everything plumb disgusted 'cause cotton was as low as it was.'

'That's right, you do work for this feller Maynard. Hear tell he's a reg'lar ringtailed caterwompus from Wouserville. Somebody was tellin' me over here the other day 't he walked up to Cap'n Shelby and spit right in his eye. How 'bout it?'

'Well, he didn't exactly spit right in his eye, but he shore talked biggity. I'm lookin' for them two to kind of have it out this fall.'

'Ought to be a good un. I'd shore like to see it, but Cap'n Shelby's kind of run things down here for a long time an' I guess he'll keep on.'

'Maybe he will and maybe he won't,' said Farley meditatively. He closed one eye and squinted through a crack in the floor that revealed the cool green of the racing water. 'Depends kind of which way the cat jumps,' he added cryptically.

They gossiped. Farley seemed to have ample

leisure. Now and then Wilson rose, sacked the meal, and moved it to one side while placing another sack under the hopper. Or he would dump the hopper full of grain. But these were only momentary interruptions and he returned quickly to his seat.

The two of them talked with the aimless garrulity of the backwoods. Farley was lulled by the drone of the millstones and the chuckle of the water and also he wanted to efface the strangeness of his presence. He had not yet broached the real object of his visit. It was not until nearly noon that he did so.

'Ben, Mis' Mary Ruth an' me had a argiment 'bout her cotton the other day. You know you ginned hers last year. She claimed her gin number was Y-459, but I think she was wrong. Ain't you got a record of that somewhere's 'round here?'

'Yeah. It's all over at the gin. We have to keep a record of our gin tags. The mills make us do that. I guess you'll find it in the ledger over there.'

'Mind me lookin' at it?'

'Hell, no. That's what we keep it for.'

Wilson dumped the hopper full of corn, hung a fresh sack under the spout and the two of them walked over to the ginhouse where, after considerable rummaging, Wilson drew out a dog-eared ledger from a high desk.

'Here 'tis,' he said. 'You'll find it under the Ys.'

Farley showed no eagerness. He spat casually through the open door and riffled the leaves of the book idly. 'Much obliged. Mind if I copy them numbers?'

'Not a bit. I gotta get back to the mill. Just throw the book back on the desk and come over when you're through.'

The miller departed, leaving Farley hunched over the account book. Even under the most favorable circumstances Farley read with painful difficulty and his progress with the sprawling characters of the account book was slow.

He turned to the Ys and ran his finger down the sheets until he paused. He read intently, his lips forming the words and the stubby tip of a forefinger marking his place.

There they were. The Yates plantation cotton. Y-459. Every bale bore that serial number. He checked them carefully. Then he rose to his feet and went to the corner of the building where he could see the grist-mill. No one was in sight and he returned to his seat before the door of the office.

There he took a knife from his pocket and cut out the sheets that he had been reading. These he tucked carefully in a leather wallet. He restored the book to its place on the desk and then, again whistling his tuneless air, went back to the grist-mill.

'I was right,' he nodded to the miller who turned an inquiring face toward him. 'I thought I was right.'

He was in no hurry to leave. He lingered in interminable talk, now and then interrupted by the infrequent appearance of a boy with a sack of corn to be ground.

At last he rose to go and spoke casually to Wilson.

'Say, Ben. Do somethin' for me, won't yuh?'

'Sure.'

'Don't mention to nobody that I was by here lookin' for these numbers. Ain't nobody liable to be interested but me an' I ain't makin' no big show of my business.'

Backwoods people are incurious folk. Wilson nodded. 'Sure. Don't make no difference to me. I won't say nothin', but I shore am glad you come. Come some more.'

'All right.'

Farley mounted his horse leisurely and kicked the sluggish animal into a trot. When a bend of the road hid him from the mill, he drew out his wallet and examined the sheets. His weasel face was lighted with inward pleasure.

'Now, ~~by God~~, we'll see how far he'll boss me.'

With a glance at the sun, he hurriedly restored the papers to his pocket and thumped his horse into a hand gallop. 'They'll wonder where I been,' he muttered. 'But, hell, I don't care. They ain't got a idea.'

He turned his horse into the stables at the plantation and went up to the store, where he found Larry Maynard waiting for him.

'Where are those dust guns that I gave you the other day?' he demanded.

Farley took him back to the storeroom and got them out. They were nothing but a blower with a

small fan attached. They were used for dusting the cotton plants with calcium arsenate to protect them against the boll weevils.

'You goin' to dust already?' Farley asked.

'Sure. I'll get the ones that we didn't burn when we picked up the squares. That was the biggest trouble. The boll weevil isn't so hard to fight if you use common sense. Here I cleared the fields of all the stalks. These weevils hibernate in the stalks and when I did that I got rid of a lot of them. Then when they laid their eggs in the squares the squares dropped off. When I burned those there went another crop of weevils. Now I'm going to start the dust guns and those that are left 'll have a hard time.'

Larry lived every waking moment with the plantation and his workers. Grimes and Sellers managed the gangs in the fields and he kept an eye on the whole.

Mary Ruth marveled at Larry's untiring energy. He was up with the dawn and frequently the roosters crowing at midnight found the light still streaming from his window where he bent over his desk and planned the next day's work.

He was infrequently in Lebanon and virtually without contact with Aarons County. He did not mind and he seldom thought about it, remembering that others were as busy as he.

Larry's hurt healed under the satisfaction of work well done and his bitterness was gradually dissipated. There remained only his sensitiveness and

his determination not to expose himself again to such a sneer as Rob Wilmot's.

Mary Ruth had worked shrewdly. He was a little more tolerant of the county's ideals. In their contact she had defended and explained and softened and soothed. Larry had not been as difficult as she had feared. He was too wrapped up in his work to give overmuch weight to outside considerations.

Mary Ruth did not withdraw from the county. She blossomed under the renewed contact with men and women of her kind. She accepted invitations and returned them. The corridors of the Big House echoed now to the light-hearted voices of youth.

Mary Ruth tried to get Larry to join them, but he would not.

'It isn't that I don't want to,' he said a little wistfully. 'But I haven't time. Later, perhaps. Right now I've got to be in the fields with the hands and then work at the store. I'm just too tired when I come in, Mary Ruth.'

Other plantation owners were as busy as he and he saw little of them. Lebanon he shunned, going there only when absolutely necessary and then only to the bank and post-office.

He did not hear of the talk in the county. He had made enemies of the merchants at Lebanon. Shelby already feared and hated him. These were two powerful leavens in the feeling of the county.

Rob Wilmot attempted to wean his father from his loyalty to Larry and left Major Dave shaken.

'He's just working for a corporation,' Rob Wilmot

said. 'He doesn't care for anything but to make profits. We don't want that kind of people down here. You know what he's doing to us fellows in Lebanon. There's a trick in this warehouse proposition.'

'There can't be, Rob. The thing's straight.'

'All right. You wait and see. Do you know that you've given him authority to market every bale in that warehouse and that you won't have a thing to say about your own cotton? And he'll run the warehouse. There's a lot of trickery possible. Do you know how much money ten thousand bales of cotton runs into? Ever stop to figure? It's better than three quarters of a million dollars. Have you got him under bond?'

'He don't handle any money for us,' Major Dave argued. 'That all goes through the bank.'

'Maybe you think he don't, but you wait and see. I'll bet he does. And he handles the cotton anyway. That's the same as money. You've led these small farmers in the county into this thing. How are you going to feel if they're robbed?'

'I guess that won't happen.'

Rob Wilmot argued with others besides his father. Shelby, too, was working quietly. Aarons County changed its views of Larry Maynard. Somehow the impression got abroad that he meant to swindle the county. No one knew exactly how it was done, but suspicion spread. The story gathered magnitude as it passed from mouth to mouth.

Mary Ruth heard whispers of it and came straight

to Larry. He heard her out with his crooked little smile.

'There isn't anything I can do about it, is there?'

Mary Ruth was furious. 'They ought to be ashamed of themselves. When you ——'

Curiously enough it was he who defended the county. 'No. It's human nature. They don't understand and they're suspicious. People often hold pennies so close to their eyes that they can't see the dollars. I guess I understand them better than they do themselves. I hadn't expected just this, but I should have.' He paused a moment and then spoke meditatively. 'Shelby's behind it, of course.'

Mary Ruth agreed reluctantly. 'I — I've heard things. He's angry because you hired his tenants.'

'There's something else, too. Some key to the riddle that we haven't got yet. You remember how anxious he was to keep me from getting this place. You remember you told me that he tried to get you to cancel the lease, and he tried to buy it from me. I've been putting two and two together. The answer isn't four.'

'What do you mean?'

'This. You formerly dealt with Shelby entirely. Now you don't. I wonder if there isn't something in that. What commission did you pay him for handling your cotton?'

'None, he bought it just like any other buyer in Lebanon would have done. He even took it when it was all poor quality.'

'I've wondered about that. You mean that it was every bit low quality? You've told me before but I find it hard to believe.'

'Yes. It was mostly low middling.'

'You didn't have any middling or strict middling on the whole place?' Larry's tone was incredulous.

'No.'

Larry grunted. 'Who did the grading?'

'He did.'

'Did you ever have any one else grade it?'

'No. What was the use? I was going to sell to him.'

'Because you felt under obligation to him because of the loan?'

'Yes.'

Larry smiled grimly. 'Strikes me you were rather trusting. You've been raised on a plantation. You should know that isn't reasonable — cotton is bound to vary in grade.'

'But he told me it was colored and gin-cut and — and — I don't remember what. I don't think Mr. Shelby would cheat Mother and me.'

'Don't you? That's where you and I differ. Where are the gin records of your cotton last year? Did you keep them?'

'Why — no. They're at Wilson's Gin, I guess. Mr. Shelby sold the cotton and has the tags, I suppose.'

'You didn't keep any?'

'No. Why should I?'

'Good Lord! No wonder Shelby . . .' He was silent in frowning thought.

'I'm going to fight fire with fire,' he said at last.
'It's the only way.'

CHAPTER XVII

MARY RUTH found Larry busy with a pitchfork and a lantern in one corner of the back yard. She had seen him come up from the stables and then turn aside and she had followed him curiously.

She and her mother never ate without Larry. No matter how late he came up from the stables, a spotless table was waiting and the two women to give him cheer.

Mary Ruth was bursting with desire to help him and she didn't know how. But she could do little unobtrusive things for his comfort, and she was watchful for opportunities. She did more than that, for she labored mightily in the county in his defense. Sometimes she thought she helped and again she was not so sure.

She waited for Larry each night, her ear attuned for his step and judging the quality of his day by its cadence. She knew him better now. Somehow or other she had broken down the barriers that he had built around himself. She had penetrated the wall of quiet courtesy with which he fended off intrusion. With exquisite tact she had drawn him out and comforted him in moments of discouragement.

Their relations had never been quite the same after that night when he told her of Rob Wilmot's words. Somehow, she felt after that that she belonged. Larry tacitly admitted it, too, for their talk

was not always of cotton or the plantation. Sometimes they spoke only of themselves. Mary Ruth liked that.

Now, when Mary Ruth went to meet him, her pulse quickened. When she saw him, Larry had placed the lantern to one side and was bending intently over something.

'What in the world are you doing?' she asked.

He jumped, for he had not heard her step. 'Digging worms,' he answered, looking rather foolish.

'Digging worms,' she echoed. 'For what?'

Larry grinned. 'I'm going fishing in the morning. Down on Wilkins's creek where I used to fish when I was a boy.'

'Oh, can I go too?' Mary Ruth cried. 'I'd like that.'

'Would you? I hoped you would. I was going to ask you.'

When she came down next morning he thought he had never seen a more adorable figure. She was dressed in khaki breeches with a short-sleeved shirt and on her head was a battered cloth hat. She wore boots that laced up to her knee.

'This is what I had when I ran the place,' she explained. 'Skirts were too much of a bother. Mother was rather scandalized, but I finally won her over.'

There was coffee for them in the dining-room and Mary Ruth had prepared their lunch the night before. When they went out dawn was just breaking in the east as they trudged across the fields toward

the canebrake where they would follow the creek into the swamp.

'Let's don't bother about work to-day,' Larry said. 'Let's just forget it.'

They plunged into the swamp, pushing their way through the rank undergrowth and following the creek where the ground was firm along the banks.

Their equipment was primitive. Larry had brought along lines and hooks and sinkers and corks in a cigar box and for poles he cut two of the tall canes that grew far back in the swamp.

'We won't have much luck with trout,' he said. 'I could have gotten some roaches, but it was too much trouble. The bream and the perch will take the worms all right.'

It was hushed and silent in the deep recesses of the swamp. Once they heard a splash far ahead of them. 'Mink,' explained Larry. 'When I was a boy there were lots of them in here. Coons and 'possums, too.'

'There still are,' she told him. 'The negroes hunt them in the fall when they are fat on the nuts and acorns.'

They had a wonderful day. Once in the swamp the creek spread out into quite a sizable little lake and in one of the dark pools they cast their lines and then sat and talked in hushed tones lest they frighten the fish.

Larry made love to her frankly. He wondered if she realized. They talked of inconsequential things; of places he had seen and strange lands he had vis-

ited. She told him of Lebanon and Aarons County in the years that he had been gone.

But mostly they talked of themselves and their feelings and their hopes. It was very intimate there in the hush of the swamp with the silence broken only by the murmur of the sluggish water and the occasional bark of a squirrel or the harsh cry of a jay from one of the tall scalybark hickory trees.

'I've dreamed about this,' Larry said. 'I — I never dared hope that it would come true.'

'But it has,' said Mary Ruth happily. 'And your other dreams are coming true. I feel it.'

'I wonder if you'd say that if you knew what all of them were.'

'Ye-es. Knowing you I think I would. I — I can't imagine you wanting anything petty.'

'Can't you? You set me a pretty high standard.'

'Not too high, though.'

'When you say things like that I feel very humble.'

'But I don't want you to be humble! It doesn't fit you at all. I want you to be just what you are.'

Much of their talk was like that. Now and then they were interrupted when a cork went under and they hauled out a silver perch or perhaps a broad bream that flopped around among the leaves until Larry strung it on the line with a stick at the end and put it in the water against the time when they would go home.

'Let me bait your hook,' Larry said, when Mary Ruth caught her first perch.

She submitted with a little inward smile. She was

perfectly capable of baiting her own hook and the can of squirming earthworms held no terrors for her. But she folded her capable little fingers and allowed him to spear the worm on the hook, adjust the cork and the sinker and cast the line close to the roots of a water oak before he handed the pole back.

Larry's fingers touched hers. He wondered if the small incident thrilled her as it did him.

'Were you ever homesick?' he asked.

'No. I've never been away from home long enough. I've always lived here. I suppose it seems dull and prosaic beside your life. Why, I've only been to Mobile once and Birmingham twice.'

'You are fortunate. I've been homesick.' He looked back over the years and his lips curved at a thought. 'So homesick that sometimes I felt that nothing mattered if I didn't get back home to people whom I knew.'

'Wasn't there anything — or any one in the outside world to hold you?'

'Nothing compared to what was back home.'

'And you never met any one who could make you forget.'

Larry smiled quietly. 'No. I was insulated, I suppose. The possibility of such a thing never even occurred to me. I — I always looked backward.'

They ate their lunch under a fringe of willows where it was cool and the green moss made a soft cushion. While Larry cleaned a couple of the perch, Mary Ruth searched for dry wood and soon had a fire built in a little trench in the moss. Above it

Larry made a grill of green willow withes and broiled the fish.

'It was delicious,' Mary Ruth said when the last bone had been picked clean. She licked her fingers and giggled mischievously. 'I didn't know fish could taste so good without pepper or salt.'

'We should have had coffee,' Larry commented regretfully, 'but I forgot to bring a pot.'

'Never mind, I'd rather have water.'

Mary Ruth drank from a little sparkling stream that ran down from a spring under one of the oak trees. Then they renewed their fishing and when they started home late in the afternoon, Larry swung a long string of perch with one two-pound trout out of the water and held them up for Mary Ruth's admiration.

'I haven't had so much luck since I was a boy,' he commented.

'It's been fun,' Mary Ruth agreed, unwinding her line from the pole and removing the hook and sinker and the cork. 'Let's do it again.'

'Would you?' Larry asked eagerly. 'It seems to me I've done an awful lot of talking about nothing. I was afraid I had tired you.'

'No. You couldn't do that.'

'It's been good to get away from the plantation for a day. I could do it because the field hands couldn't work. The shower yesterday wasn't much but it made it too wet to get the gangs out.'

They walked homeward in companionable silence. As they emerged from the swamp into the outside

light Larry looked backward. 'I'll always associate that place with this day and with you,' he said.

Mary Ruth answered absently. She was busy with her thoughts. 'It's a shame to spoil a perfect day with talk of work,' she said at last. 'But — but could I ask you something?'

'Of course.'

'Suppose — suppose the farmers who have signed up for the warehouse wouldn't let you have any cotton to store, what would you do?'

'Why, I've a contract with them. I could go to court and get an injunction to prevent them from delivering cotton to any one else.'

'But you wouldn't want to do that? And it would take time, wouldn't it?'

'It would. And I'd only do it as a last resort. Why do you ask?'

'I've been worried about things I've heard. They — they feel pretty strongly about the warehouse — and you.'

His face darkened and the boyishness left him. 'I know. But they'll keep their word.'

'Will they? If they're told all sorts of things about you? If the principal men in the county are turned against you? Don't you think it would be a good idea to get your warehouse built?'

'Yes, of course. But I can't leave the plantation now. I've too much to do here.'

'That's what I've been leading up to. Wouldn't — couldn't I help?'

'How?'

Mary Ruth spoke a little diffidently. 'I know I made an awful failure of the place when I had it, but I know about the field work. I — I could oversee things. I know that much. And you'd be here to tell me what to do. Then you would be free to attend to the warehouse.'

'Would you do that for me?'

'I'd do more than that.' A brief smile lighted her face.

'If the feeling of the county is so strong against me, can you afford to become too closely identified with ——'

She threw out her hands in a gesture of scorn. 'Don't talk nonsense! As if that mattered!'

'This would make you my partner, wouldn't it?'

'I've told you that I understood and sympathized. Here's a chance for me to help.'

'It will be difficult.'

'Difficulties do not frighten me.'

'I hope they won't before we're through.' He laughed a little grimly. 'Sometimes I wonder where it will all stop.'

They walked on with Larry buried in reflection. 'They shan't stop me on the warehouse,' he said at the gate of the Big House yard. 'I've started that and I'll finish it and show them I'm right. Afterward — well, that's their affair.'

That was how Mary Ruth came to have her wish. Larry took her over the fields and explained what he was doing. He showed her new methods of farming. He was daring, gambling on the weather, gambling

on the boll weevil, gambling on fertilizer and gambling on his labor. He took chances without a quiver that would have left her sleepless with apprehension.

‘It’s an even break or better,’ Larry told her. ‘That’s all I want.’

He hadn’t lost yet. The wisdom of his heavy fertilization was being shown in the growth of his cotton plants. Already the fields rippled in the wind like a sea of green. Soon the first blooms would appear and then would come time to lay by the crop and prepare for the picking.

‘I’m looking for trouble with Shelby about labor when that time comes,’ Larry said. ‘We scared him out of bidding against us for labor when we were chopping, but he isn’t through. You’ve got to have workers at two seasons of the year — when you’re planting and when you’re picking. But I’ll meet that when it comes up. Right now I’m going to get that warehouse built.’

Mary Ruth was happy. She felt that she was having a part in a battle; a real one even though the implement of warfare was a fleecy staple that Alexander the Great had brought from India and called vegetable wool.

She shared Larry’s fierce eagerness to get on with the work. She had been fired by the obsession of his idea and was working shoulder to shoulder with him. His problems were her problems and his fights her fights. It was glorious and she thrilled to every waking moment and hurried through her breakfast

that she might more quickly reach the fields and spur the hands on to greater exertions.

Much of the plantation direction was in her hands, for Larry, once he had gotten the crop well under way, forsook the plantation and spent much of his time in Lebanon where the structure that was to be the warehouse rose under his hands.

Larry had cashed the notes at the bank and recorded his lease for the land and had driven forward with the erection of the warehouse with the same energy that had marked him on the plantation. There had not been enough carpenters in Lebanon to hurry the work forward and he had imported men from Selma and even some from Montgomery and Birmingham.

The building was not elaborate. It did not have to be that to qualify for Government and State bonds, Larry explained. She asked eagerly for details of the warehouse, too, for after all the plantation was only one part of his work.

'It's not much of a place to look at,' said Larry. 'I can store ten thousand bales of cotton in it. I'm going to get out cheaper than I thought for I'm getting Cade-Reynolds to buy my galvanized roofing — they can get it cheaper — and I'm buying my lumber from one of the mills back on the river. I figured the thing would cost a dollar a bale to build, but it isn't going to run that high.'

'Will you have it ready in time?'

'Sure. This is the middle of July. There won't be any cotton ginned hardly before the first of Septem-

ber. Long before that I'll have it all ready. It isn't much to build. Just a frame scaffolding and galvanized roof with a dirt floor. You see, the dirt floor helps. Makes it fireproof.'

'Ten thousand bales is an awful lot, isn't it?'

'Not much. A standard bale of gin pressed cotton is four feet long and two and a half feet square. I'll pile the cotton on end and put in two layers. You can get an awful lot of cotton in a mighty little space when you're piling it like that.'

Aarons County watched Larry's operations in sullen silence, offering neither help nor hindrance.

The warehouse rose from the bare field almost overnight. Then Larry departed for Montgomery and when he came back he filed with Henry Grider a bond for the Federal Government and for the State. The warehouse of the Lebanon Warehouse Corporation had become an actuality.

'The bonds weren't hard to get,' he explained to Grider. 'All I had to do was to file an indemnity bond for five thousand dollars to observe State and Federal warehouse laws. They all knew me because I'd been in the warehouse business before. It was pretty easy.'

Grider put away the papers without comment. 'How's your crop gettin' along?' he asked.

'Fine,' said Larry. 'Unless I have bad luck I'll do better than I expected even. I may go as high as four hundred pounds of lint to the acre.'

'Humph. You'll do better'n anybody else.'

'Sure I will, and this year's going to be the time to

do better. Cotton will be selling for twenty-five cents by the first of January. Mark my words. I've been reading the world reports. The Egyptian crop is a complete failure. India has suffered from the floods. The boll weevil has hit Texas. Europe thinks there's all the cotton needed with a million-bale carry-over from last year. It's going to take them quite a time to wake up to the fact that the carry-over has been used up and that the new crop won't be as big as they think. When they find that out cotton will go skyrocketing. We couldn't have picked a better time for starting a warehouse than this year.'

Grider looked at him enviously. 'I'd give ten years to have your enthusiasm.'

Larry sobered. 'Maybe if you were working for the same thing I am you'd have it.'

'What are you working for, son?'

'A woman,' said Larry and left before Grider could question him further.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE weeks fled by on winged feet. July passed with its torrid days and sweltering nights. Human beings suffered under the molten sky, but the cotton prospered and the stalks grew heavy with the bolls.

August came with cooling rains and then the sun again. Heat! Radiating up from the black earth. The bolls began to swell and before the first full moon had waxed, a bit of white appeared in the fields of the Yates plantation.

'The first bolls are opening,' Larry told Mary Ruth. 'We're two or three weeks ahead. Usually they don't open until the middle of August or maybe toward the first of September.'

'You've won, then,' said Mary Ruth.

'I never figure that until I get the cotton insured and in the warehouse,' Larry answered. 'A lot can happen.'

The days were too short for Larry, for he was busy with both warehouse and plantation. He organized his cotton pickers with the same care that he had directed his chopping gangs and his ploughs during the summer.

'You don't leave much to chance, do you?' commented Mary Ruth.

'No more than I can help.'

Nobody else was ready to pick cotton in Aarons County when Larry gathered up his negroes — men,

women, and children and sent them into the fields around the Big House where there was quite a respectable showing of white.

'It's a little early to start picking,' he told them. 'Now, I'll give you seventy cents a hundred pounds, but when the bolls really start to open I'm going to cut that to fifty cents a hundred pounds. With that, if you work, you can make two or three dollars a day.'

Each woman strung a crocus sack over her left shoulder, the mouth yawning at her right hip. In each corner of the sack they put a corncob, tied a piece of plough line long enough to hold the sack from dragging on the ground, and were ready.

Mary Ruth and Larry watched them the first morning. Larry observed with satisfaction that there was a generous sprinkling of children, each with tiny sack to help mama and papa.

The women tucked up their skirts by the expedient of knotting a cord below their hips, and plunged into the dew-laden rows, raising the chant of the cotton pickers. Larry nodded at Mary Ruth as the full-throated chorus went ringing across the fields.

'I never heard music that was much sweeter than that,' he said.

Together they listened. A woman's clear soprano came to them, a little muffled by distance for the pickers were moving away.

'What kind of shoes do de angels wear?'

And then the antiphony:

'Go-olden slippuhs!'

Then the soprano:

'What kind of robe do de angels wear?'

And the deeper tones of the response where the men's voices mingled with the wailing falsetto of the women:

'Lo-ong white robe!'

'They'll do,' said Larry and turned his horse back toward the Big House. 'I've got to go into Lebanon to-day. The warehouse has been completed and I've got to see about insurance.'

'I'll keep them moving,' she promised.

Larry was thoughtful as he changed from his riding-clothes. He had his warehouse. Now to get the cotton to store in it. He was vaguely uneasy. Things were going too well for him. He knew that Evan Shelby was not a man to give over a plan and he was alert for a new blow.

He had expected it with the beginning of cotton picking, but it had not come. He had resolved to fight fire with fire, cost what it might. But he was puzzled that Shelby should remain inactive after his open declaration of war.

Buck Farley was puzzled, too, and that day over at Shelby's country place where he had gone in answer to a summons, he voiced his wonder.

'Ain't you goin' to do nothin' over at Yates's?'

Shelby looked at him heavily. He was not a man who encouraged questions, but Farley was irrepres-sible.

'They're pickin' their crop right now. Ain't you goin' to do nothin'?''

'What do you think I ought to do, Buck?' Shelby asked.

'Well, they's a number of things you could do. You ain't said nothin' 'bout what we was talkin' 'bout long to'ds the first of the summer. Then ef you wanted you could stir up his niggers.'

'Yes,' agreed Shelby. 'The hell of it is he could and would stir up mine a damn sight more.'

'I didn't mean like that.'

'Well!' Impatiently. 'How did you mean?'

'We-el, git 'em to fightin' 'mongst theirselves. F'r instance, s'pose somebody was to sneak a piece of iron in one of them cotton baskets. He'd find it shore as hell and he'd start trouble with the nigger what done it 'cause he'd think the niggers was trying to cheat him. I could git that iron in a cotton basket.'

'Ye-es, you could.'

'Or start somethin' up at the store. I went to all kinds of trouble to git Sellers an' Grimes an' you ain't made no use of none of us.'

Shelby looked at him and there was a glimmer of a smile in his eyes. 'Yes, I have. All I'm going to on the place, I guess. Fact is, I'm figgerin' on another scheme that'll give him a damn sight more trouble 'n his niggers. I'm gonna git rid of that man for good. He's goin' to the penitentiary for a good long spell an' you're goin' to help.'

Farley agreed meekly. 'Yes, suh. I guess so. 'F you say so.' But under his downcast lids his eyes gleamed. 'What do I do, Cap'n Evan?'

'I'll let you know at the right time, but it ain't till after ginnin' starts. That's better'n a puny little row on the plantation. This'll settle him for good.'

'You sent for me to come over here, suh. What'd you want?'

'I want you to git me the records Mis' Mary Ruth kept of her ginnin's last year. The gin numbers an' all of it. Steal it ef you have to.'

Farley stared at him, his face wiped clear of expression. 'Lawd, Cap'n Evan, don't you know she didn't keep no more record'n a mule 'bout that cotton? She sent it to the gin and she turned it over to you. All record she ever kept was just how many bales there was and whose place it come off of so's she could charge up the ginnin'.'

Shelby rubbed his great hands slowly back and forth across his knees. For a minute or two he did not move. His thoughts seemed to be turned inward.

'Sure of that?' he asked at last.

'Yes, suh.'

Shelby nodded. 'That makes it easier then.' He reached into his pocket and from a wallet took a ten-dollar note. 'Take this and buy me somethin'.'

'Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.' Farley took it as a dog accepts a bone. 'What you want me to git?'

'I want you to go over to Wilson's gin an' git me all the records of last year's ginnin' by Mis' Mary Ruth.'

Farley's face grew long and he shook his head. 'Cap'n, I'd shore like to do that, but I can't.'

Shelby looked at him steadily. Farley wriggled and looked about the room uncomfortably. He seemed to wilt under the weight of Shelby's gaze.

'Why?'

Farley ceased to wriggle and his eyes turned to meet Shelby's. His face grew guileless and even his eyes dulled. "'Cause somebody beat you to it,' he said.

'What do you mean?' Shelby snapped.

'I was down to the gin the other day with some corn for my place and Ben Wilson an' me got to talkin' 'bout some cotton the niggers made last year.' Farley paused and passed his tongue over lips suddenly dry. 'After me an' Ben had been jawin' back 'n forth for a right smart spell, we got to argyin' an' we went over to look at his book.' He leaned forward and spoke significantly. 'Cap'n, somebody with a dull knife had snaggled off every one of them leaves that had anything 'bout Mis' Mary Ruth's place on it. They was gone.'

Shelby's face was impassive, but Farley had studied him with furtive shrewdness, sharpened by caution, and he saw the fleshy jowls tremble, and the big hands slowly caress the broad knees that were spread wide to accommodate the overhanging paunch. Inwardly Farley was chuckling, although his amusement was carefully concealed.

Farley did not make the mistake about Shelby that Shelby made about him. He did not underestimate the man he hated and he was content that Shelby should contemptuously think him half rat,

half weasel. It was an error by which he meant to profit.

But only when he was ready. He had seen Shelby crush opposition with a ruthless and unscrupulous hand. He had helped Shelby do things that violated even his twisted code and which he would have shrunk from doing without compulsion. His hatred was tinged with a healthy respect and more than a little fear of the big man — but it was the fear of discretion and not of cowardice.

His face guileless, he waited patiently until Shelby spoke.

‘Who did Wilson say got them?’

‘Lord, Cap’n Evan, he didn’t have no more idea ’n a hen has teeth. He was shore flabbergasted ’bout them figgers bein’ gone.’

Shelby sat in frowning silence. Farley read his thoughts and enjoyed the sight of Shelby’s disquiet, for the signs were more obvious now. Again he chuckled inwardly, but his complacency left him when Shelby spoke.

‘Tell Joe to git my car and you come with me. We’ll go ask Wilson about them records.’

Farley was acutely uncomfortable on the drive out the Demopolis Pike, past the fork that would have turned off to the Yates plantation, and then down the gentle incline that led to Wilson’s Mill on Wilkins’s Creek.

Shelby rode in silence and Farley was quiet, too. He was hoping fervently. He hadn’t foreseen this. He hung back a little as Shelby got out of his car and

waddled forward. Wilson was standing in the door of the mill and he greeted Shelby rather shortly.

'Howdy, Cap'n Shelby. Come in an' set.'

'Ain't got no time for that to-day, Wilson. I come down to see you 'bout those gin numbers on the Yates cotton. Buck says they're gone.'

'So they be, but how did he — oh, yes, I guess Cap'n Maynard told him.'

'Maynard! Has he been lookin' for 'em?'

'Why, yes, sir. He come down, lemme see, night befo' last, I think it was, an' asked me if I had them figgers.'

'Did he find them?'

'No, sir. When we went to look for them they was gone. Hadn't been tore out; they'd been cut out. Haggled off with a dull knife, looked to me.'

'And you couldn't find them?'

'No, sir. I looked all over the place an' they was pintedly gone. I hated it too, 'cause Cap'n Maynard seemed real put out 'bout that.'

'H-m-m.' Shelby looked hard at Wilson. 'Ben, who's been lookin' over them books since you quit ginnin' last fall?'

'Why, ain't nobody, sir. Nobody that I can remember now, but ——' His eyes strayed behind Shelby to where Farley stood making violent grimaces. Catching Wilson's eye, the latter drew his finger significantly across his throat and pointed to himself. Wilson's gaze paused but a moment and he finished his sentence as if he had not caught the by-

play. '—— but my brother, an' he put 'em back. I seen him when he done it.'

'Let me see the book.'

Wilson flung an indifferent hand toward the shack that housed the office of the gin. 'My brother's over there. He'll show it to you.'

Shelby waddled off and Wilson looked inquiringly at Farley, who nodded.

'Yeah, I took 'em,' he said grimly. 'Done it when I was over here the other day. They're trying to say I stole some of their cotton after hit was ginned by using the same tag twict. I got on to it an' I put out over here to git them numbers. They gotta have the numbers 'fore they can prove anything.'

'Yeah. That's so.' Wilson asked no questions. 'I kind of thought maybe you didn't come over here the other day just to pass the time uh day with me.'

Farley was so relieved that the perspiration broke out on his face and he drew a sleeve across his cheeks and breathed noisily.

'I never said nothin' to you 'cause I figgered the less you knew 'bout it the better off me an' you both was. You know, we ain't got much more chance 'n a nigger.'

It was caste calling to caste. 'Well, I reckon we ain't. Not with him, anyway. I been doin' his ginnin' 'bout ten years. He ain't noways careful what he steps on. Keep 'em an' welcome an' I hope you give 'em hell.'

'Much obliged. I'll do as much for you some day.'

Wilson smiled dryly. 'I hope not,' he said, and

Farley, remembering his lie about the stolen cotton, grinned and said nothing.

On their way back, Shelby sat and stared meditatively ahead. When the car came to the Yates Fork, where Farley was to get out, Shelby stopped the car and spoke to the chauffeur.

'Joe, go on up the road a piece an' see if you can stay awake till I whistle.'

Left alone, Shelby looked Farley over appraisingly. 'Is that nigger Mose still on the plantation?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Think you can handle him?'

'I allus have, Cap'n Evan.'

'He was the one you was talkin' 'bout when you was thinkin' 'bout fixin' Maynard, wasn't he?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Think he'd go through with it?'

Farley considered judicially. 'Why, yes. 'F he knowed he was goin' to git away and there was some change in it for him.'

'You could arrange that.'

It was not a question, but Farley nodded agreement. 'Guess I could. What you got in mind?'

Shelby spoke rumblingly, half to himself, half to the man beside him.

'I tried to mess him up with his niggers an' he was too smart for me. I tried to stop the hole up at the outer end and somebody got those gin numbers before I could. I'm gonna try that man one more way — an' if I don't git him at the warehouse . . .' He turned to Farley and the smaller man cringed away.

At these moments he was afraid of Shelby. The gross face had lost its flabbiness. It was hard and the agate eyes bored into Farley like twin bits of flame. 'You start workin' on Mose,' Shelby ordered. 'I may need him an' need him right sudden.'

Farley was daring. 'You mean you'll need him if those gin numbers are found?'

'Some folks know too much for their own good.'

Farley fought back the retort on his lips. He became meek. 'Yes, sir. But, 'course, I'm interested.'

'Did you ever catch partridges in a trap?'

Farley stared at the irrelevant question and nodded.

'You set your trap and you lay a trail of corn into it. Long comes Mr. Partridge an' he's so busy pickin' up corn he never sees the trap till it's fell and there he is in the coop. I'm settin' me a trap an' I'm gonna . . . Well, you watch. That trap looks like a cotton warehouse to me.' He broke off abruptly. 'Git. I'm in a hurry. But you work on that nigger.'

Farley stood looking after the automobile long after it had disappeared around a fringe of cedar trees. His expression was baleful.

CHAPTER XIX

LARRY voiced his bewilderment to Mary Ruth. 'There's something funny about it,' he said. 'I haven't figured out what it means, but it isn't like him and he hasn't changed suddenly unless there's a reason. He isn't that kind of man.'

'You are too suspicious. Mr. Shelby has always been kindness itself to me. Perhaps he has seen what you are trying to do and is going to help you.'

Larry looked at her intently for a moment, opened his lips as if to say something and then changed his mind. He laughed shortly. 'Maybe you're right, but I'm not so confiding. It just isn't reasonable. You know how it was. Shelby tried to stop me in every way that he could when I was building the warehouse and signing up the contracts for storage. I had the devil's own time getting all the stock subscribed for the warehouse and now look at him. He tells the whole county that he thinks the idea is a good one and he's using his influence to help bring cotton into our storage.'

'Is that so strange?'

'I'll say it is. Why, we're competing with him. Instead of selling their cotton the farmers are planning to store it with us. He says it's a fine idea and he's even said he was going to store some of his own cotton with us. Sent his clerk around to the bank the other day when I was there to ask me if I'd take it.'

'What did you say?'

'I told him I would, of course. Cotton is cotton

and it's collateral the world over.' Larry paused with a worried frown. 'But I can't figure what his change of front means. Why, he's actually helping me — and after he told me that he was going to run me out of the county.'

'He found that he couldn't and he's trying to get you on his side now. I've always thought you were a little hard on Mr. Shelby. I don't know what I would have done without him while I had the plantation.'

The words brought another hard look from Larry. 'Maybe you're right,' he admitted. 'I don't want to fight anybody. I didn't come here for that.'

'Is he signing the contract to let you market the cotton?'

'Of course. He couldn't get into the association if he didn't do that.' Larry rubbed a hand over his perplexed face. 'That's another thing I don't understand. His idea and mine about what the cotton market is going to do are exactly similar. He looks for better prices along in December and he says the people who put their cotton in the warehouse will make money. I don't get it, that's all — not after his trying to knife me all summer.'

Mary Ruth stretched out a hand to where Larry sat glowering into the fire. There was unconscious tenderness in the gesture for the weeks of work together had brought the two of them very close. No word of love had passed between them but they understood each other. Mary Ruth would not have hung back, but she began to understand Larry's reluctance as she grew to know him better. He was

determined that Aarons County should forget the boy and remember only the man. Perhaps, when he had done that . . . Mary Ruth never progressed much further than that. She was content to wait and to help him in what ways she could.

There was still much to be done at the plantation, though the leaves were beginning to fall from the cotton stalks and Larry's pickers were already going over the fields for the second time. Later there would be a third picking.

'I'm not going to leave a single boll unpicked,' Larry told her. 'By January cotton's going to be better than twenty-five cents a pound. Maybe it isn't profitable to pick this cotton at fourteen cents, but the January price will be better than the September one. I'm gambling on that and I know.'

Mary Ruth clasped her hands about her knees and leaned forward interestedly. 'How, Larry? I've never understood how you could tell about cotton.'

'Cotton is governed by the rules that govern every other commodity — supply and demand. When the supply is low the price goes up. When the supply is plentiful the demand goes down. We know how much cotton the world consumes. We know how much was carried over from the last crop and we have the government estimates on the present crop. With that you can tell pretty well by a chart of prices in the past what the price will be.'

'But why isn't cotton up now instead of at fourteen cents? Why it's nearly as bad as last year.'

'There are two reasons. One is that the Govern-

ment is forecasting a sixteen-million-bale crop. In my opinion that's a million bales too high. Also, everybody who has cotton is dumping it on the market. Also, the foreign crop is off and the carry-over has been consumed. You'll see cotton go up, then come down as the mills quit the market in an effort to force down prices. It will succeed temporarily. But it can't last. Along in December the market will get away from them and the spark is coming from Manchester and not from New York. England will start the buying and when it does, you'll see prices go rocketing. But you've got to hold the market when it goes up in November.'

'It must be wonderful to understand things like that,' she commented.

'I ought to understand. I've been in it fifteen years all over the world.'

The barns at the plantation filled with the cotton as the pickers sent in the split baskets filled to overflowing. Larry set Buck Farley to weighing the cotton and crediting it in the time book as the wagons brought it from the fields. As the bins filled, Larry loaded other wagons and sent them to Wilson's Mill for ginning.

'I guess after all I'll be the first one to store cotton in the warehouse,' he told Mary Ruth. 'See here.'

He tossed into her lap a letter that bore the signature of Alex Cade:

DEAR LARRY:

Glad to hear you're getting along so well and expect such a good yield. You'll have to go some to be under the present market.

You'd better not start shipping us cotton until the latter part of December. You can store it in that warehouse you're so enthusiastic about and ship on requisition. You can sort the gradings there. We'll want the low grades first to fill a big order for colored yarn. Later we'll take the higher grades — above middling — for the white yarn for the New England trade.

We've been surprised at the cost-sheets you have sent us. You've been getting more work out of your hands than anybody I ever heard of. Your balance here is running low, but we'll credit your shipments against it if you need more money for your pickers.

Yours very truly,

ALEX CADE

'That means you'll come back another year!' Mary Ruth's face lighted as she handed the letter back.

'Looks like it. But I'm afraid to feel safe yet.'

Larry did not relax his labors. There was bound to be some ill-luck before he was through, he told himself. He had been fortunate — lucky with the weather, lucky with his plants, and lucky with his labor.

True, he had foreseen and guarded against many contingencies, but there were elements beyond his control and these had been uniformly in his favor.

As the pickers gleaned the fields clean and wagon after wagon trundled off to the gin, Larry spent more and more time in Lebanon. He was needed there more than he was at the plantation for cotton was beginning to come in from the plantations for storage.

To each plantation owner, Larry explained the

terms of agreement before he accepted his cotton.

'This isn't a public warehouse,' he warned them. 'This is a pool and when you store your cotton here you sign an agreement to let it remain here for twelve months or until we deem it to your advantage to sell it. Understand that?'

'Sure,' answered the farmer. 'But I can borrow money on your receipt Cap'n Shelby said.'

'So you can. Now here is the contract. It's the same form that the Farm Bureau Federation is using and it provides for a twelve-months pool unless in the meantime the association manager — that's me — deems it advisable to sell.'

'What's it gonta cost me to keep it here?'

'It'll cost you twenty-five cents a month for every bale you store. That's for storage. It'll cost you ten cents a bale for insurance. Your cotton is fully insured at the market value from day to day. We carry a blanket policy on the cotton in this warehouse and we only use the part of it that we need. That is, if we only have fifty thousand dollars' worth of cotton in storage, we only pay for that much insurance.'

During the first few days of the September rush, Larry brought Ted McNamara up from Montgomery to help him and to teach Bert Grant the routine of the warehouse. McNamara was a federal inspector whom Larry had known for years.

'I should think you'd have plenty to do at the plantation,' he said. 'That usually keeps a man busy.'

'I've got a good assistant,' grinned Larry. 'Besides, that's what's the matter with these farmers. It only takes about two hundred days to make a crop of cotton and the rest of the time they sit around doing nothing. I've learned better than that.'

Larry was surprised at the amount of cotton that poured into the warehouse as September passed and the real ginning rush began. Virtually every stockholder in the association stored at least a part of his crop and took his warehouse receipts to the Bank of Lebanon, where Henry Grider lent them fifty-five dollars on each bale. Cotton was hanging at fourteen cents.

'I'm takin' a good margin,' he said. 'So I won't have to call you for some of the loans.'

Larry never shook off the vague uneasiness of something unforeseen hanging over him. But he was rather astonished at the revival of his popularity in Aarons County.

The merchants were still resentful, but the farmers and the men who had put their money into the warehouse were jubilant.

'We've got working capital and still a big equity in our cotton. I guess Maynard knew what he was about all right. I shouldn't wonder if we didn't get heated up a little quick about his niggers. He's learned me something. If cotton goes up — and I believe it will because it always has — we stand to make enough profit off our cotton this year to cover our losses last year.'

Larry's acquaintance widened. Black Belt farmers are friendly folk, and they stopped for a chat when they drove in their cotton. Even the larger owners came, for they must sign the warehouse receipt and inspect their cotton.

At the Yates plantation, the fields were nearly clean when frost came. There was only a scattering of cotton hanging to the gaunt stalks and this Larry set the children to picking. They made a game of it.

He was well satisfied with his year. Presently he would balance his sheets and then he would know exactly where he stood but now he was too busy at the warehouse, for he was the licensed weigher under the federal bond of his warehouse and he must weigh every bale and personally affix each tag. Because of the federal bond, it was necessary to make a separate entry for each bale stored and the clerical work alone kept him busy.

He was watching the market, too, for on his judgment depended the prosperity of a large part of Aarons County. If he hoped to accomplish what he had set out to do there must be no error in his calculations.

He read interminably at night. Consular reports from Washington, English newspapers, market letters. The information system of Cade-Reynolds and Company was placed at his disposal and he used it freely.

Confidence in his analysis of the future grew stronger in him as he watched the market. For days there was not fifty points fluctuation and then both

New York and New Orleans saw a slight gain. It was maintained. The market caught up the slack and moved forward another fifty points. Fifteen cents. Larry put down his newspaper with a sigh of content.

He went out to the platform where the huge scales for weighing the cotton stood. Temporarily the platform was deserted and he had a moment for himself. As he stared down the tracks he saw the garish depot.

'Bert, I'm going down to the depot a minute,' he said, sticking his head in the office door. 'If anybody comes, tell them to wait.'

At the depot, he presented himself at the window and asked for Eli Gandy, the agent. Gandy was cordial, for Cade-Reynolds was a good customer of his railroad and was to be a better one when shipments started.

'Eli, have you got copies of your bills of lading for shipments of cotton made last year?' he asked.

'Yeah. They're 'round here somewheres. What you goin' back to last year for?'

'I'm curious about the weights the Yates's cotton had. Let me see the bills for those shipments. Shelby made them, I think. The cotton was all sold through him.'

Gandy drew down a dusty file and began thumbing the leaves. At last he paused.

'Here's Shelby's bills. He shipped pretty near all over the country. What's the number of the gin tags on the Yates's cotton?'

'I don't know. I thought maybe you did.'

Gandy looked at him blankly. 'How the hell should I know? Here's all his shipments. How you goin' to tell which is which without you know the gin numbers?'

Maynard scratched his chin. 'Damned if I know,' he confessed. 'I guess you can't.'

'Git me the numbers and I'll tell you which it was and where it went and who to and how much it weighed, but I can't without 'em.'

'All right. Much obliged. Sorry to have troubled you.'

On the depot platform, Larry stood a moment in thought. Then he snapped his fingers.

'Can't hurt anything. Maybe I'll smoke him out. Let him know I'm on his trail anyway.'

He found Evan Shelby in his office in the Shelby building. The men greeted each other cordially.

'Set down. Have a cigar.'

Shelby rolled a long, thin Havana across the desk and Larry lighted it.

'That's fine,' he said. 'I've come around here to tell you I appreciate your attitude on this warehouse proposition. I rather expected you'd fight that, too.'

A chuckle shook the vast convolutions of Shelby's body. 'You're too smart to fight, son. I found that out quick. We need young fellers that are as smart as you in this county. Need 'em bad. Don't mind admittin' that I've changed my mind, and I'm glad to see that you've sort of changed yours.'

'Armed neutrality, eh?'

Shelby put on an injured air. 'Now I wouldn't say that. Ain't I been helpin' you on this warehouse proposition? Ain't my own cotton in that place? Ain't I trustin' in your judgment just like most everybody else in Aarons County? How much further can I go, Larry? Come on, now, be reasonable.'

Larry didn't believe a word of it, but he matched duplicity with guile. 'That's all true and I appreciate it. I've shown it by coming here. I came up to ask a favor.'

'Ask it.'

'I'm curious about some weights on the cotton Miss Yates ginned last year. I want to compare my own yield with hers. Have you got the gin numbers on her cotton?'

Shelby's face wore a look of dismayed regret.

'Now ain't that too damn bad. The very first thing you ask me an' I can't help you a mite. I never kept no records of them gin numbers, son. That cotton was loaded right on the railroad platform an' never went through my office at all. The gin tags was used for the railroad numbers, too.'

Larry rose. 'All right,' he said carelessly. 'It wasn't important,' he said as he left.

On the stairs, Larry swore softly. 'That cinches it. He lied. He got the gin numbers at Wilson's Mill. I've got to find them.'

In the office, Shelby's face lost its assumed benevolence. 'I better git that there partridge trap good and ready.'

CHAPTER XX

LARRY MAYNARD spread out the sheets of paper covered with neat rows of figures before Mary Ruth and straightened with a sigh. 'There it is,' he said. 'That's the result of our last year's work.'

Mary Ruth looked at the figures helplessly. 'You'll have to explain them. I couldn't make anything out of them. The very sight makes my head swim. I didn't know you were through yet.'

'Just about it. We've ginned a little over thirteen hundred bales of cotton and I'm pretty sure we'll get enough to run it to fifteen hundred bales before we are through. Do you know what that is in yield? That's three hundred and seventy-five pounds of lint cotton to the acre. Nothing's ever been done in the county like that on a plantation as large as this.'

There was no boasting in his tone, only a quiet pleasure in work well done.

'How did you do it, Larry? I haven't understood yet.'

Larry gestured toward the papers. 'It's all there. I'll be glad to explain if you won't be tired.'

'Why, Larry! As if anything about the place could tire me.'

'All right.' Larry shuffled the papers through his fingers. 'These are the detailed cost sheets of the operation for the plantation on a twelve months' basis. My December figures are estimated of course and I've figured on a round basis of fifteen hundred

bales on the two thousand acres I had in cultivation.'

Mary Ruth made herself comfortable in the big chair at the corner of the desk. Her dark, piquant face was alight with interest. The worried look that it had worn earlier in the year had been replaced by one of eager alertness. The brown cheeks that were tanned by sun and wind were full of health. She made an attractive picture in the firelight and with the shaded glow from the student's lamp on the table.

'This is going to be full of figures,' Larry warned. 'That's the only way you can summarize what we have done.'

'I don't mind.'

'All right. We'll start with the fixed charges first. We paid you four dollars an acre for the land — that's eight thousand. We paid you two thousand on the interest of the stock and implements and for stock on hand at the store.

'All right. Now we come to the fluid items. The first thing I had to do was the problem of feed. I didn't grow any because I could buy it cheaper, having the cash to do it. We had eighty head of stock on the place — most of them mules. A mule eats six bushels of corn a month and a ton and a half of hay in the year. I bought corn at a dollar a bushel and hay at \$15 a ton. So I fed my stock for \$7700 for the whole year. Understand?'

'Surely. Go on.'

'The labor cost the most, of course. I worked about sixty ploughs. It only requires about a

hundred and fifty days to make a cotton crop. Ninety days of this is field work and the sixty covers the picking. As you know I paid my labor a dollar a day and rations and I worked them more than the hundred and fifty days because I had to keep them busy and give them a little cash. So that my field labor cost me \$11,650 for the year. Added to that was the executive staff of the two overseers, the stable boys, the hostlers, Buck Farley, and myself. I charged the plantation with \$6000 to cover that.'

'You didn't pay yourself much.'

'No, but you see I'm drawing my salary from Cade-Reynolds and it can't be charged against the plantation. Then we had the picking to do. That was another big item. I find that I averaged paying them fifty cents a hundred pounds over the year. When the stalks were heavy I paid them forty cents. Sixty and seventy when it was scarce. Fifteen hundred bales of cotton is two and a quarter million pounds of seed cotton and at that average it cost me \$11,250 to get the cotton picked.'

'What about the food?'

'For the tenants you mean? That wasn't so expensive. I furnished each family four pounds of meat a week, a peck of meal, a quart of molasses, pound of coffee, pound of sugar, lard, salt, soda, and small stuff. I bought it at cost and it didn't cost me over a dollar and a half a week to feed them. Here's the item. The total food bill for the place was about seven thousand dollars.'

'The total is mounting,' she observed.

'Oh, you haven't struck the really big item yet. That's fertilizer. You know, I used 500 pounds to the acre. That's the answer on my 375 pounds of lint cotton yield. Fertilizer cost me about \$8.70 an acre because I bought it and had my own hands mix it. I used 200 pounds of phosphate and 100 pounds each of nitrate and potash as the proportion. You see the soil is tight packed here and won't assimilate so much nitrate. I bought fertilizer at \$60 for nitrate, \$18 for phosphate and \$12 for potash. My total fertilizer bill was \$17,400.'

'Why — why — I never spent a third that much for fertilizer.'

'I know you didn't, and you didn't get anything like the yield I did, either. Then we had the weevil poison. I spent a lot of money on that. I bought the dust guns and I used thirty pounds of calcium to the acre and with arsenate at ten cents a pound that was three dollars or \$6000 for the whole place.'

Mary Ruth murmured her amazement. 'I never used any of that.'

'I suppose not. But it's the only way to fight the weevil — that and cleaning the fields. That brings us down to the ginning of the cotton. The Wilson brothers charged me six dollars a bale and the bagging and ties cost three dollars more. That's \$13,500 for the ginning, and ——'

'What about your seed?' she interrupted.

'Oh, yes. I forgot. I got the best seed that money could buy. I paid four dollars a bushel for them and I used a bushel to the acre. That put my seed bill at

eight thousand dollars for the year. And I guess that's about all.'

'My head is swimming. How much does it amount to?'

'Roughly it comes to \$98,000. And here is an itemized statement of the whole thing so that you can see what it looks like altogether.'

Mary Ruth studied the neat row of figures in silence. He was right. There was the history of the year on the plantation. The figures showed:

Rent.....	\$8,000
Implements and stock.....	2,000
Field labor.....	11,650
Executives.....	6,000
Picking cotton.....	11,250
Ginning.....	9,000
Bagging and ties.....	4,500
Seed.....	8,000
Fertilizer.....	17,400
Stock feed.....	7,200
Weevil poison.....	6,000
Food for labor.....	7,100
TOTAL COST.....	<u>\$98,100</u>

She handed it back with a sigh. 'I suppose if I had kept records like that I wouldn't have been such a failure running the place. Now what are you going to get for your cotton?'

'Why, of course, we didn't grow all high-grade cotton,' he explained. 'If we had, we would have made a killing. But we've been pretty lucky at that. We got a hundred bales of premium cotton.'

'What's that?'

'That's cotton with the staple better than an inch long. The mills making fine yarn will pay most anything for it. I was credited sixteen cents for it when the market was only fourteen. That's eight thousand. We got two hundred and fifty bales that graded strict middling and the mill credited us fifteen cents. That was \$18,750. The bulk of the cotton was middling and was credited at fourteen cents for seven hundred and fifty bales. That's \$52,500. I'm figuring the remainder as low middling or worse and we'll get a credit of about eleven cents for the four hundred and fifty bales. That's \$24,750.'

'What does it all come to?'

'The cotton would bring, I figure, pretty close to \$104,000 if it was sold in the open market. But we don't do that. We ship to Cade-Reynolds and the farm is credited at the market.'

Mary Ruth sobered. 'For heaven's sake, Larry! You don't mean that you're only going to make \$6000 on the place?'

Larry laughed. 'I don't really make anything, but Cade-Reynolds credits me with the market price of the cotton on the day I store it. I send them the warehouse receipt. Sure we'll have a bigger margin than \$5000. You forgot about the seed.'

Mary Ruth's face lightened. 'So I did.'

'That's quite a sizable sum. You see, there's a thousand pounds of seed to every bale of cotton that weighs five hundred pounds. That's 702 tons and I sold them to the mill down at Lebanon for \$25 a ton. That gives us a handsome paper profit of over \$21,000.'

'What did the cotton cost you a pound, Larry?'

'Figuring in the margin of profit to reduce the cost, it was a little better than 11.88 cents a pound. The market was fourteen cents. That's more than I said I would do.'

Silently Mary Ruth held out her hand. 'It's been wonderful to watch you,' she said. There was a little choke in her voice. 'I suppose you know that you've changed everything for us.'

Larry stood looking down at her. 'There's still something else to be done before we wind up the year,' he said enigmatically.

'Are you going away for a while when the cotton is all shipped?' Mary Ruth asked.

'No. I should say not. I've got to begin planning for next year. You see, I didn't raise any feed stuff this year. Next year I'm going to rent some land near us and grow nothing but feed. I'll use this place for cotton only with just enough rotation to keep the land busy.'

'I'm glad of that,' Mary Ruth said.

'Why don't you and your mother go away for a bit?' Larry asked. 'You could, you know.'

'Mother doesn't want to leave and neither do I. We're going to have an old-fashioned Christmas in the Big House for everybody on the place. It's the first time we've been able to afford it since Father died.'

'I'll be Santa Claus,' volunteered Larry. 'And you'll have to get up early to cry Christmas Gift to me before I catch you. You know the plantation

custom. The first one to cry Christmas Gift must receive a present from the other.'

'Yes, I know. Forewarned is forearmed.'

But Christmas was nearly two months off and Larry threw himself into the work of the warehouse with redoubled vigor now that his plantation worries were at an end.

Larry had begun to dream dreams. In the excitement of the mounting cotton prices he had lost his diffidence in his dealings with the men of Aarons County. He even permitted himself a little cordiality as he realized that he was the center of the county's hopes and the object of its adulation.

Mary Ruth helped subtly to restore his self-esteem that had been so badly damaged by Rob Wilmot.

'You see,' she told him, 'I knew that he didn't represent the county. This is what they think of you. I knew they would all the time.'

Larry agreed with a smile that was a little ironical, but not at all cynical. He frankly found the change grateful. His naturally sunny nature had chafed under the repression. He had found the isolation irksome and he practiced again the warming effect of a smile.

If the county had expected him to be superior and what it would have termed 'biggity' it was pleasantly surprised. He met the farmers with patient friendliness and found that he was himself disarmed by their implicit faith in him.

He looked into the future and saw himself occupying Evan Shelby's place in Lebanon — only with the

difference that he would develop and not repress. He had no great craving for money in itself. That was not his measure of life. He was filled with restless eagerness to lead men and to see prosperity bloom under his hand and a county rejuvenated.

The warehouse filled rapidly. Larry was hard put to it to find space for the plump bales that poured in from every gin in the county. The farmers were intoxicated with the prospect of ready cash; for the first time in years they knew freedom from money worries. Cotton was going up and they still owned theirs with no creditors hounding them to settle their accounts.

Larry worked incessantly. He was to be paid for his time, but not until the year was closed. Now he labored merely to make the venture a profitable one. He was building prestige for the future and was content with a very modest sum to repay him for his time. This would be paid out of the profits from the warehouse, after which they would be apportioned against the payments on the stock.

The market woke up early in November. New Orleans crawled up another hundred points to sixteen cents on the pound. New York followed, and Liverpool, but there was no break.

Then came the final report of the Government census and despite the forecast of sixteen million bales, ginnings were more than a million bales below the normal figures when there was no reason for leaving the cotton in the fields. There could be but one answer. The Government estimate was too high.

Cotton letters from the east, from New Orleans and from England began advising their clients to cover their requirements and there was a rush of buying. But the spark that finally shot the market up came from Hamburg and not from Manchester or New York. German mills, for the first time since the war, actively entered the market.

Larry was content. He saw the market go from sixteen to seventeen, then to eighteen, nineteen and when cotton touched twenty cents a pound there was a celebration in Lebanon. Twenty-cent cotton meant prosperity.

Larry was almost overwhelmed by the gratitude that followed him wherever he went. Farmers who had cotton in the warehouse came to be assured that they were not dreaming. Every word about the market that Larry let fall was treasured and repeated.

Many of the farmers in the county were glum, of course. They had scoffed at the warehouse and had sold their cotton when it was picked and while the market was sagging under the weight of millions of bales of distress staple just such as theirs.

Farmers with cotton safely stored grew almost hysterical. Some of them, despite Larry's protests, went to the bank and increased the loans on their cotton by virtue of the increase in its value. Cotton that had been worth seventy dollars a bale when it was stored was now worth a hundred.

Larry became first uneasy and then alarmed. He summoned the executive committee of the ware-

house association and spoke vigorously. The meeting was held in the rooms of the Lebanon Civic club and every man who had cotton stored attended.

Major Dave Wilmot presided and combed his beard with his fingers while Larry talked.

'It isn't time to sell yet, Major,' he said. 'And when you increase your loans you are gambling that there will be no reaction in the market. If you borrow to the maximum on your cotton, if the price should go down then you'd have to pay back part of the loan. If you'd spent the money there wouldn't be but one thing for the bank to do and that would be to sell your cotton.'

'You lookin' for a break, Larry?' Major Wilmot voiced the question that everybody wanted answered. If there was to be a break, they wanted to get out while getting was good. They had their money. They weren't hogs.

Larry answered cautiously. 'If I could tell what the cotton market would do, I wouldn't be in Lebanon. But it is reasonable to suppose that the mills with contracts they haven't covered and the speculative interests that have sold cotton short are going to worry the market back if they can. The German mills haven't closed their contracts yet. They are only making inquiries. I'd say there would be a reaction, yes, sir.'

Major Wilmot looked around the room at the eager faces. 'Why not sell now then?'

'Because cotton is going to twenty-five cents by the first of the year. Then will be the time to unload.'

‘How do you know that?’

Major Wilmot was going cautiously. His faith had been shaken by his son, who had not rested content with merely one protest, but had continued to pour out invectives against Maynard.

Larry told them why he expected higher prices after the reaction and because he had studied the market for months. His words were convincing.

‘There are nearly eleven thousand bales in the warehouse,’ he concluded. ‘A difference of five cents a pound makes a difference of twenty-five dollars a bale. In other words we stand to make more than a quarter of a million dollars if we hold on. Aarons County can use that money just as well as speculators in New York and New Orleans.’

‘Ye-es, I reckon’ we could,’ agreed Major Wilmot slowly. ‘That is if we are sure of getting it. You’ve heard ’bout the dog that lost his bone tryin’ to grab the other dog’s bone away from him.’

For more than an hour Larry answered questions, curbed avarice and held in check the desire to sell. He could have arbitrarily refused to sell under the terms of the contract with the warehouse and there would have been no appeal, but he did not wish to do that.

One farmer was particularly insistent on selling. Larry knew him to be a neighbor of Evan Shelby down on the River Road. He wondered if there was any connection between Maxwell Berry’s insistence and that proximity of plantations. But Evan Shelby was there and unexpectedly he spoke in support of Larry.

Berry, however, was not satisfied.

'I can't sell my own cotton, eh?' he demanded. 'Cotton that I worked for an' made myself?'

'Not under the terms of your contract,' Larry answered placably. 'You don't want to throw away the very thing we've been working for.'

Berry subsided muttering. Larry saw him arguing vehemently with the men around him.

November dragged. Cotton crept up to twenty-two cents and there was renewed pressure on Larry to sell. 'It's going to twenty-five before January,' he said steadfastly. 'I'll not be satisfied with less than that.'

Then the reaction came. There were reports of a strike in Germany that paralyzed the German mills and took them out of the market. American mills having covered their emergency requirements ceased to buy. There were encouraging reports from Egypt and India. Every mill joined in the chorus to force the market down and the tremendous speculative interests that had sold cotton short at twenty-two cents threw their weight into the scales.

Cotton went back to twenty cents and then slowly receded ten points at a time until it rested at eighteen.

Aarons County was paralyzed. As the market went down, Larry's office was besieged with excited farmers clamoring for him to sell. Sell now while he could still get a profit.

'I knew there was somethin' crooked 'bout this whole bisness,' Maxwell Berry growled. 'I guess

you're figgerin' on waitin' 'till cotton gits down where you want it an' sell it to that corporation mill of yours.'

To Larry's amazement, Berry's fantastic charge found credence among the farmers who were as hysterical with fear at the thought of losing a profit as they had been at the prospect of getting it. Nor could he argue with them. They listened to him with hard eyes and sternly set lips and then walked away without reply.

Even Major Dave Wilmot, who found the triumphant 'I told you so' of his son galling, listened doubtfully.

'There ain't no denyin' that you're actin' kind of funny, Larry,' he said. 'We could of got out for twenty cents an' made a handsome profit. I for one was dead anxious for you to do it an' I ain't never rightly understood why you hung back. Now if you take my advice you'll rescue what we can out of the mess.'

Larry threw out his hands in despair. 'My God, Major,' he cried. 'I'd counted on you. You want me to help cut your own throat. I'm not worried by this. Cotton's coming back when the speculators get through manipulating it. I won't dump your cotton on a falling market and help push the price down more. Don't you see that's just what they are trying to do? They're trying to force out the cotton that's being held just like ours. They figure everybody will get panicky and do what you're trying to get me to do. Then what happens? As the cotton

comes on the market it sends the price down further.'

Major Dave's beard and hair bristled. 'I don't know much about that,' he said. 'I know that unless cotton goes up or I realize on what I've got stored in that warehouse, Henry Grider up at the bank's goin' to have to sell me out an' I won't get much more'n the face of the loans.'

'But I begged you not to increase your loans —'

'Damn it!' said Major Wilmot bitterly. 'If I'd had my way none of this would ever have come up.'

Maxwell Berry led a delegation of furious farmers down to the warehouse.

'We've come to ask you a question,' he said without preamble. 'Be you goin' to sell or not?'

'I'm not.' Larry met bluntness with bluntness.

'Ain't nothin' goin' to change your mind?'

'The market.'

Berry turned on his heels. 'Come on, folks. There ain't no use in arguin' with him but one way.'

Afterward Larry wondered about that last sentence, but now he was too filled with anger. The storm that had burst about his head lighted a flame in his eyes that grew steadily hotter under the baiting to which he was daily subjected. He knew he was right and his wrath slowly hardened into inflexible resolution. Softness left him. This second fall from the place he had thought he occupied so securely in Aarons County left him embittered and resentful.

'You put your cotton in my hands, I'll sell when I think it's wise,' he told Major Wilmot.

'What the bank ain't already sold before you,' answered the major with equal asperity. The men snapped their angry eyes at each other. Behind Larry was the written contract that would hold in any court in the state. Behind Wilmot were the farmers of the county.

'You ain't going to sell nor let me sell?' asked Wilmot slowly.

'Not now,' answered Larry.

'Then I wash my hands of you an' I apologize to the county for the day I tolled 'em into this thing. You fooled me. I'll admit that. You're a soft talker, young man. But you can't catch me with that kind of bait but once. I'm through with you in every shape, form an' fashion — my lawyer'll talk for me after this. An' I'm goin' to see that everybody I got any influence with does the same.'

At the Big House, Mary Ruth laid a tender hand on Larry's bowed head. 'Poor boy,' she murmured. 'Don't take it so hard. It's only human nature. Don't blame yourself. I'm sure you're right.'

Larry did not lift his head, but one groping hand caught hers and squeezed it — hard.

Up in his office Evan Shelby chuckled and shook ponderously and caressed his knees.

'Gittin' 'bout time to spring that partridge trap,' he told himself and sent for Buck Farley.

CHAPTER XXI

Two men stood in the shadow of the long building that housed the cotton entrusted to the care of the Lebanon Warehouse Corporation. They were distinguishable in the blackness as mere darker blurs against the gray of the galvanized sides of the squat structure.

A thread of moon hung in the eastern sky, but not even this faint luminance pierced the shadow where the two stood listening. At last Evan Shelby spoke.

'Come on. He's gone home. I'll show you where you'll have to get in.'

They moved forward cautiously, feeling their way along the wall until they came to a door where Shelby halted.

'This is it,' he whispered. 'You'll get in here. You'll have to saw the staple on this lock. It won't be hard.'

Buck Farley fumbled with the flimsy padlock and the hinge fitted over a staple. 'No, I guess not. Don't feel like it was much. Then what do I do?'

'Start your fire. Better start it in one corner of the place. I want folks to sure know how this was started.'

There was a startled grunt from Farley and a moment of silence. 'You want 'em to know it was set?' he asked at last.

'I sure do. What else you think I'm gittin' you

to set it for? Ain't I got cotton of my own in that place?'

'You're figgerin' on protectin' me? I ain't hanker-in' to do no jail term.'

Shelby snorted contemptuously. 'Nobody's goin' to know anything about you, or even think of you. Ain't you seen through what I'm aimin' to do yet? This is that partridge trap I was tellin' you 'bout.'

'I don't git you.'

'This ain't no time to start no argument. I brought you down here to show you the lay of the land. I want you to know what you was doin' when you come down here on business.'

'When will that be?'

'I don't know. When I think cotton ain't goin' no lower. Then the county won't git no madder at him an' there won't be any use of waitin' any longer.'

'You figger the whole place will burn?'

'It better. That's part of your job. That cotton's been in there most two months now. The air is full of lint and you start a fire in there an' it'll burn like a powder factory. Wouldn't surprise me none if you give it half a chance if it didn't all catch fire at the same time. You know how them things burn.'

'Yeah. I guess I better have me a way to get right out of there.' Farley was thoughtful. 'My ~~idea~~' he added. 'You aim to burn up all that there cotton in there. There must be nigh onto eight thousand bales.'

'I reckon you're 'bout right. There's that much in there or more. The bank ain't sold more'n four

thousand bales. The more the better for what I aim to do.'

'I don't git you.'

'The more cotton folks has in there, the madder they'll git at him.'

'They won't think he had anything to do with it.'

'They won't, hey? Like hell. That's my job. This here's yore'n. I'm goin' to make it my special bisness to see that they does think so — an' I'm goin' to put 'em in a position to prove it.'

'What do I ——'

Shelby moved impatiently. 'Hell, this ain't no place for talkin'. Come on if you've found out all you want to know. I'll tell you more when we git in the car. It'll be safer there.'

Farley was silent during the short walk back to the River Road where Shelby had parked his automobile. It was not until they were rolling along the uneven road toward Shelby's plantation that he renewed his questions.

'The cotton'll be insured, won't it?'

'Sure. That's one of the things that's goin' to send him to the penitentiary for a good long stretch. Folks round here might be fooled, but you can't fool one of them insurance companies. They'll do the prosecutin' an' if what I've seen 'em do in other cases means anything they're hell on wheels.'

'I see. So's the folks here in the county won't lose nothin' — only the insurance company, which must pay for the cotton.'

Shelby's body shook as he chuckled. 'There's

where you're wrong agin. 'Twouldn't do to let him git off that easy. I gotta rile these folks up 'bout him an' the best way to do that is through their pocket-books. Sure they'll lose somethin'.'

'I can't see where it is.'

Shelby was unusually garrulous. He seemed in high good humor and Farley ventured more questions than he would ordinarily have done and Shelby answered readily enough.

'You wouldn't, of course. Well, here 'tis. This scheme is the best I've ever had. Y'see, cotton's now round fourteen cents and it's goin' a little lower. But y'see he's right about it. It's goin' back up as shore as God made little apples. But that there warehouse is goin' to burn when it's bringin' just as little as I can figger it will bring. Then when it goes up agin everybody'll figger they have lost the difference.'

'But they'll git the insurance,' persisted Farley.

'You damn fool, 'course they will. But they'll git the insurance on what the cotton's worth at the time it was burned. What they'll lose 'll be the difference between what the insurance company has to pay 'em an' whatever the high point of the market is. I figger Maynard comes pretty nigh knowin' what he's talkin' 'bout an' she'll be pretty close to twenty-five cents in January. That's a difference of fifty-five cents a bale. An' on eight thousand bales that comes to nigh onto four hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Think that'll be enough to rile 'em up? Why, the jail won't be able to hold him.'

Farley gave a startled exclamation. 'You — you figgerin' on that?'

'What?'

'You — you know. They might git worked up so strong they'd — take him out.'

'And string him up, you mean?' Again Shelby's gross form shook under a huge chuckle. 'They might,' he admitted. 'It's been done down here before when folks thought the law didn't prescribe no fitten punishment.'

'You — you figgerin' on egg'in' 'em on to do that?'

'I ain't goin' to stop 'em.' Shelby dropped his levity. 'That's the sheriff's job an' if they figger they're bad 'nough hurt to dispose of him for good I ain't goin' to lift a finger.'

Instead of being frightened, Farley only became more wary. 'You shore must have it in for him,' he commented.

'The county ain't big enough for us both. I give him fair warnin' to protect himself. He walked into this thing with his eyes open, now it's up to him to git out of what's goin' to happen to him — if he can.'

The automobile stopped before Shelby's house with the long lane of walnut trees lining the drive. Farley would have gotten out, but Shelby detained him.

'Wait a minit. I want you to do some things fust. I want you to git all ready for this. I want you to take a can of some kind from the plantation over there.' He jerked his head toward the Yates place. 'I want some kind of can that folks will be sure to

know come from there. And I want you to fill it full of gasoline and bring it up to my office. That there can's gonna be found inside that warehouse after it's burned.'

'That ought not to be hard to git. What else?'

'You git a pair of pliers or somethin' that some of the folks out to that plantation can identify an' you'll use 'em when you break into the place the night it burns.'

'All right. Anything else?'

'No, that's all, but git 'em right away 'cause I don't think we'll have to wait long.'

Farley stood silently as if waiting until Shelby climbed down from the car. 'That's all,' he repeated. 'You can go on now.'

'No, suh, seems to me like you've forgot one thing.'

'What's that?'

'What do I git out of doin' this?'

'What you've allus got, I guess. A piece of change an' anything special you're hankerin' for. You've allus been pretty reasonable.'

Farley shook his head. 'That ain't enough.'

'How come?'

''Cause it ain't. I been thinkin' 'bout this an' the more I been thinkin' the less I liked it. I'm takin' a chance of gettin' myself kilt.'

'Don't be a fool!'

'That's just it, Cap'n Shelby,' answered Farley softly. 'I ain't goin' to be a fool. You said it yourself. S'pose somethin' slipped an' these folks found

out it was me that set that fire. Guess it'd be me they'd take out of jail — 'f I was lucky enough to get there. Besides, there's somethin' else.'

Shelby's lower lip began to quiver and his blue eyes grew kindly. He lost his momentary brusqueness and became almost benevolent. Farley was not deceived; he had studied the man too long for that. He grew more wary and more determined to carry out the plan that already had assumed shape in his thoughts. The hour for which he had waited for years was coming closer, he thought. He licked his lips in the darkness and his ferret eyes took on added sharpness.

'What else you talkin' 'bout?' Shelby asked mildly. 'You ain't gittin scared, are you? There ain't nothin' to be scared of.'

'That's what you say. Your skirts is goin' to be clear. Just like it was 'bout Mister Upchurch that time. You didn't take no risk an' I took it all. I been payin' for that foolishness ever since. A feller don't make that sort of a fool of hisself but onct an' I've already had my time. I ain't goin' to do it by myself no more.'

Shelby leaned forward and peered at him in the dim light. 'Since you're remindin' me of that old affair, I still got the evidence in my safe deposit vault down at the bank. It can always be dug out.'

'Yes, it kin,' agreed Farley sulkily. 'But I guess worse things 'n that could happen. You've said that before, but that thing's been gittin' further an' fur-

ther away all the time. An' I'd ruther take my chance with that than go into this warehouse bisness by myself. I tell you, Cap'n, I ain't anxious to get lynched at all an' furthermore I'm goin' to have some'n besides you tellin' me that you'll take care of me 'fore I go into that.'

'I'd hate to dig into that Upchurch affair,' said Shelby smoothly.

'Now, Cap'n, there ain't a mite of use for you to go to throwin' that thing up to me. It's a question of which thing I'm scared of most an' I'll tell you right now it ain't that. If you want to make me trouble 'bout that other thing, why I guess you can. But you'll have to do some explainin' yourself.'

'What?'

'How you come to keep that stuff all these years. They'll wanta know why you ain't told ——'

'I guess I could fix that all right.'

Farley lapsed into surly silence. Shelby looked about him into the soft darkness. A light dew was falling; the leaves of the walnut trees whispered in the wind. The yelp of a hound on the trail of a coon came faintly from the depths of Wilkins's Canebrake and once a negro's voice was raised in a distant cry of encouragement. Shelby thought with massive deliberation. Was it better to yield to Farley's insistence or would it be more profitable to carry out the threat to send him to the penitentiary? It could be done; Shelby smiled a little at the thought. But then Farley had been useful and he planned to use him more.

'You ain't told me what you want yet,' he said at last. 'Maybe we're fightin' 'bout nothin'.'

Farley exhaled noisily; he meant the breath to be interpreted as a sigh of relief. His voice trembled a little for he wanted to seem fearful.

'I'm scared to do that by myself,' he said. 'I want you to go with me. I want you to help me an' then we'll both be in it an' whatever happens to one of us'll happen to both of us.'

Shelby's rhythmically moving jaws halted. There seemed something poised about his great figure. He turned his face toward Farley and even through the darkness the man could feel his glance.

'You want me to be in it, too?'

'Yes, sir. I told you I'd had one experience doin' things by myself an' I ain't goin' to have no more.'

'You want me to go down there with you?'

'I shore does. An' after that it'll be "us" an' won't be allus just "me."'

'Why is that necessary?'

'I've told you, Cap'n.' Farley drew a sleeve across his face and found it hard to control his anger. He thought of the years that he had done the man's bidding and he straightened at the thought that the day of his freedom had arrived. His voice lost its subservience as the knowledge grew on him that Shelby had to have him. 'If we do that together y'ain't goin' to be able to pop the whip over me same's you would a mule. I've gee'd and I've haw'd whenever you said so long enough. This here's

where we come to a more rightful arrangement. We goin' to be in this together.'

'I see.' Shelby's voice was almost purring. 'And after it's over you think that because you know so much you can do as you please. Is that it?'

'Something like that.'

Shelby's silence was baleful. Farley answered it.

'It ain't goin' to do you a bit of use to talk about what's over. It's different now. You've got to have me to do this an' when it's over I'm goin' away from here an' you ain't goin' to be able to stop me 'cause you're goin' to be in it same as me. I ain't noways certain 'f I did it by myself that you wouldn't arrange to git me in the same boat as him. Y'done it once before, anyway. I figger you'll take good care to keep yourself from gittin' lynched an' I'd rather trail with you like that.'

Shelby grunted deep in his throat. 'New kind of talk for you, Buck. Didn't have no idea you felt that away.'

'Well, I do.' Farley grew more aggressive at Shelby's placative tone.

Shelby grew more benevolent and Farley forgot the bitter lessons experience had taught him.

'I never had no idea you felt like that,' Shelby repeated. 'All right. I'll go with you. There ain't a bit of trouble comin' up over this for nobody but him. But if you want me to go with you I'll go along to make you feel better. Need anything else to satisfy you?'

'No, suh. Guess not. 'F I did I'd ask for it. Later

on maybe I'll talk to you 'bout last year's ginnin'. I kind of got an idea I could git holt of them figgers from the gin 'f I had enough money.'

Shelby stood motionless. And when he spoke there was an altered note in his voice. 'You do. Where are they?'

'I ain't found out yet exactly, but I can get 'em 'f it's worth my while. An' I guess it will be to you.'

'I'm learnin' things to-night.' Shelby's voice sounded bewildered. 'Why, I'd give a right smart to git hold of them gin figgers.'

Farley laughed unpleasantly. 'I guess you would. Git them an' there ain't nobody kin tell what kind of gradin' Mis' Mary Ruth's cotton was last year, kin they? Let Cap'n Maynard git his hands on them figgers an' it wouldn't take him long to find out how much money you took from that girl last year by buyin' her cotton for low middlin' an' sellin' it for strict middlin'.'

'You know an awful lot,' Shelby spoke softly. 'Ain't Maynard got those gin numbers?'

Then Farley made a mistake. He told the truth. 'No, suh, he ain't,' he boasted. 'He ain't got 'em, but he'd like mighty well to have 'em.'

Shelby closed the door of the car after rolling up the window. 'All right,' he said indifferently. 'When you get 'em bring 'em over to me an' we'll talk turkey. I've allus been liberal.'

Farley seemed disappointed at having won his victory so tamely. He lingered for a moment. 'Then you'll help me with that bisness at the warehouse?'

'Yes, I'll do as much as you do,' Shelby said.

Farley whistled happily as he walked homeward toward the Yates plantation. He was content. After the fire Shelby would be unable to dictate to him and as for the gin figures . . . well, he could sell those either to Shelby or Miss Mary Ruth according to whichever one wanted them the most.

Behind him Shelby sat in his bare house wrapped in thought until the sun came up out of the east.

CHAPTER XXII

AARONS COUNTY settled down with grim purposefulness to watch the cotton market. The work of the plantations was over for the winter and the men who had fought the sun and the rain and the boll weevil all summer had nothing to do but gather with others of their kind in Lebanon and talk.

Mostly they met on the steps of the courthouse where in groups they discussed the one thing uppermost in all their minds — cotton. They drifted down to the depot when the morning train came through from Selma and there was a rush for the Montgomery papers the moment the bundle was thrown from the baggage car.

Heretofore, Lebanon had accepted the fluctuations of the cotton market with wrathful resignation; but now there was sullen, smoldering anger. They had seen profits in their hands and they had gone so swiftly that it left them with only one emotion — rage.

It was all directed against one man and Larry Maynard felt it beat upon him when he walked through the groups on the sidewalks. He had become a pariah in the town that only a month before had hailed him as a new Messiah. Now and then he caught a muttered sentence as he passed a group of farmers.

Nor was his reception in the stores more cordial.

Lebanon merchants had neither forgotten nor forgiven his buying in Selma and Montgomery. They would have liked to refuse him such small purchases as he found necessary for the plantation commissary. Though they could not reject his money, they took little trouble to hide their hostility and even the clerks waited on him with a sneer.

Larry would have been less than human if he had not been depressed under the load he was carrying.

Outwardly Larry was unmoved by the county's hatred, but underneath the surface he winced and his spirit quivered. But there was no strain of weakness in him and his pain merely hardened his determination.

'I'll show them,' he told Mary Ruth, by now his sole confidante save Grider up at the bank — and even with him Larry was reserved, for Grider was of the county and lived its life.

'I know you will, Larry.' Mary Ruth's sympathy and understanding were very heartening. 'I've known it all the time. You'll only have to live through this once. Next year they'll have confidence. You didn't think the thing you were trying to do would be easy, did you?'

'No-o, but I didn't think it would be this hard.' Larry turned his eyes on Mary Ruth's face where the firelight played on it. 'I couldn't have done it, if it hadn't been for you.'

'I'm glad I was able to help. I'd have liked to have done more, but I didn't seem to know how.'

'You fed me when I was starving.'

There was a vibrant note in Larry's voice and Mary Ruth glanced at him. In adversity they had come much closer together than ever they had been when the world smiled on him and there was not a cloud in the sky.

'I — I don't know how to answer that. Mother and I have merely ——'

'I didn't mean material things.' A brief smile lighted his careworn face. 'I was thinking of things of the spirit — intangible things that you probably didn't realize that you were giving me. I have been very selfish. I've taken endlessly from you.'

'Only what was yours of right.'

'Ah.' Larry stared into the glowing coals and his shoulders moved under a sigh. 'I haven't a friend in the county. I — sometimes it's pretty hard to stand things down there in Lebanon.'

'But you will,' said Mary Ruth quickly. 'You won't let them ——'

'No, of course not. But it's — it's a temptation sometimes. It doesn't seem to matter whether the men in the county have cotton in the warehouse or not. They hate me just the same.'

Mary Ruth soothed him as best she could. His moments of confessed discouragement were rare. Usually he looked Aarons County squarely in the eye and told it to go to hell.

'You picked me out for this job,' he told Maxwell Berry on the courthouse square when Berry stopped him. 'A month ago you thought I knew it all. I was right then and I am right now.'

Berry looked at him a moment. 'You'd better be,' he said quietly, and turned on his heel.

Others had gathered around them at the sound of their raised voices. Larry sensed the menace of that swift, silent gathering of men, their faces flinty and their eyes hard. But the spark that was needed to set off an explosion was not forthcoming.

Not that Aarons County was idle. It tried to get out of the trap into which its enthusiasm had plunged it. Maxwell Berry even went to Montgomery to consult Thomas Richard Foxhall, the State's leading lawyer.

But he got scant encouragement there. Foxhall asked a few pointed questions.

'Your association is a coöperative one, isn't it?'

'Yes,' answered Berry.

'No profits are intended to be made?'

'No.'

'And you have pooled your cotton?'

'We signed an agreement when we formed the association that no cotton should be sold in twelve months unless by the market agent.'

'That is, you went into a twelve-months pool?'

'Yes, sir.'

Foxhall shook his head. 'There isn't any legal steps you can take to force him to sell. You are operating under the laws governing the coöperative marketing associations in this State and the supreme court has decided that very point in the case of *Warren vs. the Alabama Farm Bureau Federation*. It's in the Hundred and Fourth Southern I think. Let

me see.' The lawyer reached up a skinny arm and took down a book. He turned the pages rapidly, read for a moment, and then cleared his throat. 'Listen to this,' he ordered and began reading:

In the event of a breach or threatened breach of such marketing contract by a member, the association shall be entitled to an injunction to prevent the further breach of the contract and to a decree of specific performance thereof.

The grower shall have the right to stop growing cotton and to grow anything else at any time of his free discretion; but if he produces any cotton during the term hereof, it shall all be included under the agreement and must be sold only by the association.

He closed the book with a snap. 'That's the contract you signed and the supreme court of the State says it's good and binding. If you can't prevail on him to sell, there isn't any legal way you can force the cotton out of the warehouse until the expiration of the pool.'

Berry rose slowly. 'You say there ain't no legal way?' he questioned.

'None.'

'Then I guess we'll have to kind of consider the ways we got left,' he said.

Back at Lebanon his report further inflamed the county, which wondered how it had ever come to deliver itself so thoroughly into the hands of Maynard. The muttering grew sterner.

Then fresh fuel was added to the county's mounting anger. Maynard began to ship cotton out of the

warehouse. Fifty and a hundred bales at a time, the cotton left the Lebanon station, and it wasn't long until a committee from the association came down on him to demand an explanation.

Larry received them courteously in his bare little office. Berry was the spokesman.

'Whose cotton are you shippin'?' he demanded.

Larry looked at him steadily and then went to the small safe in a corner where he got out his ledger sheet. 'The cotton that has been shipped belonged to Cade-Reynolds and Company,' he answered quietly. 'It was grown by me on the Yates plantation and here is a statement of the storage charges.'

Berry looked over the ledger sheets while the men behind him shuffled restlessly.

'You only been shippin' your own cotton to Cade-Reynolds?'

'Yes.'

A voice was raised from the crowd. 'Just like you said it would be, Berry. When cotton got down 'most to nothin' he starts shippin'. I wonder when that cotton was sold.'

'This isn't a sale,' Larry explained patiently. 'This cotton belongs to Cade-Reynolds. It was grown for them on the Yates plantation which they leased. It was stored here merely because they were not ready for shipments.'

'Yeah. How come they leased a place. I never heard before of nobody doin' what they been doin'. I guess they just wanted to get you in down here.'

Larry's lips tightened and he said nothing. Berry's angular face was hard.

'There's something funny goin' on here,' he said. 'I kind of thought when cotton got where it wa'n't goin' no lower you'd sell to Cade-Reynolds, or whoever it was you was actin' for. That's comin' true right now. How do we know you ain't sold them cotton when cotton was up to twenty cents an' not shipped it till it was down to where 'tis now? How do we know you ain't doin' that an' pocketin' the diff'rence?'

Occasionally they struck a spark from Larry. 'You don't,' he answered equably.

The men's eyes began to snap. 'Lemme see the gin numbers an' the warehouse numbers on that cotton you been shippin',' demanded Berry. He evidently expected Larry to refuse, for his voice was aggressive. 'We got cotton in here and we got a right to see. Maybe you can fix the books. I dunno. Maybe you can do most anything. But we sure are goin' to sit on your heels. Lemme see them tags.'

Larry looked at him hard, started to speak, and then closed his lips firmly. It would not do to grow angry. The men needed but an excuse.

'Certainly,' he agreed quietly. 'Come this way.'

He led them through the interior of the warehouse, which was nothing but a huge shed with a galvanized iron roof and a dirt floor. The cotton was stacked on end in two layers, one bale on top of the other. Larry stopped before a block of the cotton set off to one side.

'Here it is,' he said. 'You can note the gin num-

bers of the tags if you like and the numbers of the warehouse tags and go back and see the record of them.'

Berry made notations and the committee left after they had inspected the books. Larry understood perfectly what they thought — that he was shipping cotton that did not belong to him. His lips twisted again and he shrugged his shoulders wearily.

Those were bitter days for Larry. He grew dour and silent, wrapped in his own thoughts and intent only on the cotton market. He read unceasingly and Mary Ruth saw that his mail bore postmarks from all over the world.

He was carrying a tremendous responsibility and the strain told in the lines that appeared in his face.

'Of course, I might be wrong,' he admitted to Mary Ruth, as the days dragged and cotton still hung at fourteen cents. 'No man can tell the future of the cotton market for certain. If I could do it I'd be a millionaire this year. It's a gamble, of course.'

Mary Ruth tried to comfort him. 'I don't think you are wrong,' she said. 'I — I feel it.'

But Larry was pessimistic to-night. 'If I'm wrong, I've cost this county pretty heavily. Suppose cotton doesn't go up as I believe it will? What would the county do then?' He shrugged his shoulders and his smile was tired. 'I guess I'd be lucky to get out with a whole skin. Suppose ——'

Mary Ruth interrupted with determined cheerfulness. 'Quit supposing,' she admonished. 'You've

done everything you can. It's out of your hands now and you've nothing to do but wait. Don't torture yourself, Larry, dear. You'll come through all right.'

'I hope so,' said Larry, and then more cheerfully. 'One thing I've demonstrated, though, and that's something. I've converted the Old Man to my idea of growing cotton cheaper than he can buy it. I've had an answer to my cost sheets. He thinks I've done a great job and he's willing to keep it up. As soon as this warehouse thing gets settled I'm going up to see him. But that isn't what is worrying me now.'

'I know,' soothed Mary Ruth. 'But things will come out all right.'

They grew very close to each other under the strain of waiting. She knew how keenly he felt the hostility of the county and she made it a point to appear with him frequently in Lebanon. Often she drove to the warehouse and helped with the books in the office. She wanted him to have the comfort of her presence in his isolation.

It was an isolation that grew keener each day that saw the market still sagging under the weight of bear pressure. The economic pinch in Aarons County was growing keener on the farmers whose cotton was held securely in the warehouse. They could not pay their debts to the merchants and the merchants could not pay theirs to the jobbers nor the jobbers to the wholesalers. The whole credit structure of the county tottered and Maynard bore the blame for it.

Seeing at last the futility of argument or justification, he dropped all attempts to explain his views. He looked neither to the right nor the left.

'If I've got to be arbitrary, I'll make a good job of it,' he told Mary Ruth with a grim laugh. 'Damn 'em, one thing is certain, they can't scare me.'

Aarons County wasn't trying to scare him; it was in deadly earnest in its demand for the release of its cotton. When Berry reported the opinion of the Montgomery lawyer, a lean farmer from the Tombigbee River bottoms stood up.

'That there cotton in the warehouse is mine, ain't it?' he asked Berry.

'Sure 'tis.'

'I never signed no bill of sale for it an' it's certain that I ain't got no money for it. That right?'

'Yes.'

'Then come Monday mornin', I'm going to hitch up my mules to my wagon an' I'm goin' to drive down to that warehouse an' when I leave there I'm goin' to have what belongs to me.' His face grew bleak. 'An' if anybody tries to stop me, why I guess it'll be a case for a Aarons County jury an' I ain't a bit afeard of what a jury 'll say under them circumstances.'

There was a chorus of approval from the farmers. Berry was silent. He intended to have no part in this but if it was done he would benefit by it and he, like the river farmer, had little doubt of what an Aarons County jury would say — if anything happened. Such verdicts were always the same: 'We,

the jury, find the defendant not guilty by reasons of self-defense.'

The farmers crowded around the man from the river and they fell to discussing their plans earnestly.

'If we all go you know he ain't goin' to stop us takin' our cotton,' a voice said. 'We'll all go together an' then there won't be no ruckus nor nothin'.'

Evan Shelby was present at the meeting but took no part in the discussion. When it was over he went to his office and called a number in Montgomery. He seemed to have trouble in getting the person he wanted and swore fretfully. At last the connection was established to his satisfaction and he talked for five minutes. Then he hung up and sent for Buck Farley.

'We're ready to spring the trap,' he announced when Farley swaggered into the room. Farley's manner had changed since their night visit to the warehouse; he was more assured; he took less trouble to pretend fear that he did not feel; already he was tasting the joys of independence.

Shelby was not irritable under the prickings of Farley's insolence. He accepted it a little meekly, but now and then his great hands caressed his broad knees for a moment. Sometimes his eyes turned speculatively on Farley, but there was only a momentary gleam in them.

'Got all your stuff ready?' he asked.

'Sure,' answered Farley. 'The can's over there in that corner and the pliers are in the desk. When you figgerin' on gittin' it done?'

'We've got to act quick or it ain't goin' to do what I'm aimin' to do. This is Friday. I guess Saddy night would be the best time. You come up here 'bout nine o'clock to-morrow night an' we'll spring a trap he ain't gonna never git out of.'

Farley was suspicious. 'An' you're goin' down there with me?'

'Yes.'

'You're goin' to do as much in this as I do?'

'I figger on doin' that.'

'All right then. I just wanted to make sure you understood so there wouldn't be no hitch in this.'

Farley swaggered out and Shelby sat looking after him for a moment and then his features lifted in a grim chuckle. Then he took down the receiver of his telephone and gave the same number he had called previously.

This time his connection was made more quickly and he talked rapidly, pausing now and then for an answer. When he had finished, he went to the corner of the room where the can stood and picked up the pliers. He lifted the can and shook it. It was more than half full and his nose told him that it was gasoline.

He wrapped it up carefully, dropped the pliers in his pocket and went out with the can under his arm.

CHAPTER XXIII

It was Saturday night and Mary Ruth and Larry lingered over their supper in the cosy dining-room of the Big House. Maynard had been detained at the stables and at the commissary until long after the early winter darkness had fallen, but they had waited for him while Martha grumbled in the kitchen over the difficulty of keeping the food warm.

'You shouldn't have waited,' Larry remonstrated when he came in. 'I would have been here sooner, but Farley wanted to get away early to-night and I paid off the men.' He paused and then added regretfully, 'And I can't stay but a minute, either. I've business at the warehouse to attend to to-night. I've got to get some mail on the late train.'

'Oh, Larry,' was all Mary Ruth said, but sharp disappointment was in her voice. 'And this is Saturday, too.'

Larry had put on cheerfulness he did not feel. 'Can't be helped. Business comes first, you know.'

But despite his announced intention of haste, Mary Ruth dawdled over her partridge and the creamy rice anointed with spicy gravy. There were flaky biscuits and sweet potatoes and afterward a lemon custard with a wedge of hickory-nut cake.

They talked desultorily — of cotton. There was no thought of anything else between them now.

'It's got to rise pretty soon,' Larry said. 'I see by the New Orleans papers that Liverpool is up a little. The factors are gathering. The bears can't postpone it much longer and when it does break with everybody rushing to cover you'll see the market go skallyhootin' up like a skyrocket. But I — I wish it would hurry up.'

'Are things bad — in town?' she asked sympathetically.

'Pretty bad. And getting no better fast. They think more of a cotton-mouth moccasin than they do me.' He smiled wryly. 'Not that I care ——'

'Yes, you do, Larry,' she interrupted. 'Of course you care. Everybody cares what his neighbors think of him. Don't say you don't care; but they'll feel differently when the cotton goes up.'

'I guess you're right, but I wish they would.'

She tried to change the subject. 'Have you done anything about Christmas yet?'

'Lord, no. I've never thought of it. It's only two weeks away, isn't it? I guess I've been too busy to notice anything.'

'Mother and I thought — we planned to have a barbecue for the negroes. With nuts and things at the store. It would make them feel better.'

Larry's smile was tired. 'I'll help, of course.'

Mary Ruth was reluctant to see him go. She detained him until the last possible moment with desultory talk. She even went with him to the front door when he had looked at his watch for the third time.

'Don't go in to-night,' she begged. 'Stay here and rest.'

'I can't. There are letters to be gotten on the train and the books to be posted.'

'Can't it wait until Monday? You are too tired to go in to-night. Don't go to-night, Larry.'

'I must. I'll come home as soon as I can.'

With that he was gone. Mary Ruth stood on the porch and listened to the sound of the little flivver until it died away.

She was worried about Larry. His nerves were near the breaking point. She breathed a fervent little prayer that something might happen to help him. He'd been so tired to-night.

Her throat filled at the thought of his face. If the county would only see what he was trying to do.

She was roused from her revery by the sound of a motor and she waited wondering who could be coming at this time of night. Absently she noted that the engine was missing. The lights paused at the gate and there were sounds of footsteps on the brick walk.

Mary Ruth stepped back into the hall and lifted the lighted lamp on the table so that she might see better. It was a stranger who walked into the circle of radiance.

He lifted a checked cap from his head and bowed. Mary Ruth waited expectantly for his question, but no words came. She saw his jaws working and he seemed to be making a mighty effort, but not a sound came from the laboring tongue.

'Who do you wish to see?' Mary Ruth asked.

His temporary paralysis broke when she spoke and he stammered his question:

'C-c-c-c-an y-you tell me the w-w-w-way to Lebanon?'

'You'll have to go back.' Mary Ruth was conscious that he was tall and spare, but the light from the lamp she held blinded her to more details. 'You took the wrong fork where the road curves. You turned left. You should have taken the right. That will take you right into town.'

Again the man's body was convulsed with effort. His jaws opened and he strove to speak. Mary Ruth waited in fascinated expectation for the words that finally shot out:

'T-t-t-hank you, m-m-ma'am.'

The man climbed back into his car and retraced his way until he came to the forks of the road. There he growled in disgust at his stupidity in losing his way and drove rapidly until he saw the lights of Lebanon across the railroad track. When he was almost to the town he ran his car to the side of the road and there halted and switched off his lights. From a pocket he took an electric flashlight and lifted the rear seat. In the tool box was an Alabama license tag. This he inspected for a moment and then went to the rear of the car where he took off the license tag and substituted for it the one he had taken from the tool chest.

The discarded tag he took into the woods after a quick glance up and down the road to see that it was deserted of traffic. Fifty yards from the road, he

found a hollow at the foot of a pine tree and there he buried the tag under a pile of pine needles hastily scraped together.

Returning to his machine, an inconspicuous flyover, he drove leisurely into Lebanon and up to a garage on Courthouse Square.

'Are you open all night?' he asked the attendant who came forward. Again there was the preliminary effort and the jerking aspirates of the afflicted stammerer.

The garage attendant nodded and with many facial contortions and vocal stumblings the man made his wants known. He desired to leave the car there for a few hours to be thoroughly greased, re-filled with oil and gasoline, a punctured tube repaired and air put in his tires. He intended to make Meridian before morning if the roads held out.

To the garage-keeper the traveler volunteered information that he planned to get supper, rest for a while and then resume his journey after a short nap.

'Need a raincoat to talk to that feller,' was the only comment. 'My God, but he sure do stutter and spit.'

The words would have pleased the man who walked leisurely about Courthouse Square to the lighted front of a restaurant which he entered and painfully gave his order. The light showed him to be wearing glasses. He ate rapidly and then wandered aimlessly forth after stammering to the cashier an inquiry about roads.

Outside, he paused to perform a minor dental op-

eration with a toothpick. The night was cold and he shivered for a moment under the blast of the wind that whipped around a corner.

Then he walked leisurely toward the Shelby building, glanced about him for a moment and then began the ascent of the darkened stairs instead of choosing the elevator.

At Shelby's door he knocked and a deep voice invited him to enter. He found Shelby behind his desk, hunched over account books.

'I was beginnin' to wonder where you was,' Shelby rumbled. 'It's most nine o'clock.'

'Yeah, but that's pretty good time all the way from Montgomery over these roads,' said the tall stranger, and now there was no sign of impediment in his speech. 'How do you ever get your eggs to market down here? Not in a flivver, that's a fact.'

Shelby grunted. His mood was not one for humor. 'You ready to go through with our agreement?' he asked.

'Sure. When you've done your part.'

Shelby drew out a wallet. 'Here's half of it. I'll pay the rest in Montgomery after it's done. You understand everything, do you?'

'Hell, yes. There ain't much to understand in a little hick burg like this. I'll be away before they know anything's happened.'

'How've you fixed it?'

The man told him and Shelby laughed. Then he added final and detailed instructions. He talked until the man grew restless in his chair.

'Hell, what do you think I am? A amateur?'

Shelby paid him no heed but finished to his own satisfaction.

'I don't want this started until two o'clock. There's reasons for that. One of 'em's so's it'll have a good chance of gittin' started an' the other don't concern you.'

Shelby passed over the roll of bills, which the other pocketed after carelessly counting them. 'I've got about four hours to kill, then.'

'Guess you have. You can wait here for a while and then I'd sort of drift down and see if there's anything stirrin' down there and git the lay of the land. I've explained it to you pretty thoroughly, but you'd better see for yourself.'

The men talked desultorily. In the light the stranger's face was hawklike. He looked speculatively at Shelby and then at the safe in the corner and a slight smile wrinkled his leathery cheeks. Shelby did not see the sardonic smile.

Finally the man rose and stretched. 'I guess I'll be gettin' on,' he said. 'See you in Montgomery.'

Shelby ventured a final caution. 'Now don't get careless because you think this is a hick town. I don't want nothin' to slip.'

When the man went out he closed the door carelessly behind him and walked toward the stairs. After a moment a shadow detached itself from the end of the hall and drifted forward noiselessly, then crept cautiously down the stairs.

At the bottom the stranger turned back toward

the railroad and the shadow followed on silent feet. The pursuer looked about him and gave a low whistle. Two dark forms materialized from the side of the building and the three of them lounged onward, keeping a wary eye on the careless figure ahead.

Upstairs Shelby wrote steadily. Now and then he listened for footsteps in the hall and then looked at his watch. The streets had long since been darkened; the lights of the stores were extinguished and the sidewalks were deserted. Lebanon slept.

Shelby finished his writing; restored his papers to the safe, and then from the drawer of a desk took a small black object with a loop of leather attached to it. When he dropped it on the floor it seemed surprisingly heavy. This he put in his pocket, lighted a cigar, and cocked his feet on the desk.

He was waiting and the minutes dragged but his eyes did not close. He sat quiescent, but his thoughts were busy. It had been a hard year for him. Next year would not be so hard. He'd make sure of that to-night.

Midnight came. Shelby snapped out the light in the ceiling, pulled down the shade of his outside window, and lighted another cigar.

One o'clock. He began to be impatient. If Farley did not come . . . One-thirty. He began to frown and meditate ways of making his annoyance apparent.

Then Farley came in furtively, slipping down the hall and entering noiselessly.

"'Bout time you was gittin' here," growled Shelby.

'I was beginnin' to think you wasn't comin'.' He eyed Farley. 'What's the matter?'

'Nothin',' answered Farley, but Shelby knew he lied. The man's eyes were dancing and his lips were drawn back over his protruding teeth until he looked more than ever like a rat.

Shelby looked at him curiously. The man seemed afraid. So much the better. But he'd never understood how much of a rat he was until he saw him now quaking and shivering at the thought of what he was to do.

'Ready to start?' Farley asked.

'Ain't no rush. Don't want to take no chances of nobody bein' awake.' Shelby looked at his watch. 'Ain't much use of our startin' before two o'clock.'

Farley looked about him. 'Where's the can?'

'I hid it down there by the buildin'. Didn't think I was goin' through Lebanon luggin' a can of gasoline at this time of night, did you? S'pose we was to bump into Old Man Judson? He's night policeman but he don't spend all of his time down to the depot. What'd he think? And I put those pliers down there, too.'

Farley looked at him and was attacked by a new fit of shaking and quivering.

'Come on, le's git it over with,' he cried. 'I ain't strong for this here waitin'.'

'Don't crowd me. Keep your shirt on.'

'You goin' with me?'

'I told you I would, didn't I?'

Some of Farley's disquiet seemed to leave him. He appeared less terrified. 'All right, then.'

'I promised you I wouldn't make you go into this thing by yourself.' Shelby was benevolent. 'I aim to keep my word. Well, git your things together and we'll start out down there. It's two now an' I guess if the town's sleepin' it oughta be sleepin' now.'

Farley and Shelby walked down the flights of stairs together. Their steps seemed unnaturally loud in the stillness. Reaching the street they turned up their coat collars against the wind that swept out of the north with cruel force. The only sound was the rattle of the bare branches of the catalpa trees where they rubbed against each other.

Shelby seemed in no hurry. 'We better not go down to'rd the depo', he said. 'We might meet Old Man Judson. I don't want to meet nobody to-night. We'll go out here a little piece and then head back.'

Farley followed him and they walked out to the end of the paving where the frozen ground crackled under foot. Then they turned back.

There was no moon and the outlying streets were dark. Farley was walking with his chin tucked into his coat when he was halted by a startled exclamation from Shelby.

'What's that?'

Ahead of them there was a light that momentarily grew larger. Then there was the sound of revolver shots and a voice came to them in faint shouts. The yellow glow turned to crimson and smoke began to pour upward.

'That's the warehouse now,' Farley cried excitedly.

'I reckon it is,' agreed Shelby softly. 'I wonder who could of set it.'

Farley turned to answer. 'I know ——' when his words were cut short.

Shelby's great hands had reached out suddenly and clutched his throat. The huge fingers squeezed down remorselessly. Farley tore at them ineffectually; he was helpless in Shelby's grasp.

Shelby lifted him from the ground and shook him. 'Threaten me, will you!' he growled. 'I'll teach you.'

It seemed that he meant to choke the life out of Farley. The little man's heels beat a devil's tattoo on the frozen ground and his struggles grew feebler. His head lolled over to one side and his tongue protruded from his jaws. His eyes were popping from his head.

Again Shelby shook him and then set him on his feet. Iron fingers loosened and Farley breathed in whistling gasps. He staggered and would have collapsed if Shelby had not held him.

Shelby watched him grimly in the growing light from the fire. Farley was able to stand at last and he staggered away from Shelby, leaning weakly against a tree. His eyes turned to the big man in fascinated fear.

When Shelby stepped forward Farley tried to scramble to his feet, but he was too weak. Shelby held out his hand.

'Gimme the gin numbers on the Yates cotton,' he

ordered. 'I know you've got 'em here and git back to the Yates plantation an' don't try to outsmart me no more. Give 'em here.'

Farley backed away as Shelby moved forward. His jaws worked but still he could not speak. Both men were too intent on each other to hear the growing clamor from the direction of the fire. The alarm bell in the courthouse tower had begun to ring. Lights were appearing in the houses. Voices called out to know the reason for the alarm.

Farley still backed away when Shelby lost patience. His hand went into his pocket and came out holding the blackjack he had placed there earlier in the night.

He sprang forward with surprising agility for one of his age. Farley whirled to run, but Shelby's savage blow caught him on one ear and dropped him sprawling in a limp heap.

Shelby did not pause in his stride, but catching up the limp form in his arms plunged into an unlighted side-street and in a few minutes turned into the darkened stairway of the Shelby building.

Farley was still lying limp in his arms.

CHAPTER XXIV

LARRY MAYNARD and Mary Ruth gazed at the smoking ruins of the warehouse in stricken silence. It was hardly dawn yet, but even in the half-light, Maynard's face was white and drawn as he gazed on the bales of cotton that had burst and now smoldered and smoked.

He and Mary Ruth had been roused by a frantic clamor at the front door and an excited voice had cried the news that the warehouse was on fire; hurrying footsteps on the porch and then silence.

Larry had dressed in unbelieving haste but when he dashed into the hall Mary Ruth was before him.

'I heard,' she explained simply. 'I'm going with you.'

Together they raced for the flivver and then away into the chill darkness. There was little talk between them. Mary Ruth huddled close to him, her hand on his arm.

'Perhaps it isn't as bad as we fear,' she ventured once.

'You know cotton,' answered Larry gloomily. 'If a real fire ever gets hold of it, nothing on earth can stop it.'

She merely patted his arm and he urged the flivver faster, his face set.

Long before they reached Lebanon they saw the light in the sky. The fire had died down now, but a

huge column of smoke rose from the ruins of the warehouse where Lebanon's single fire company with its antiquated equipment tried ineffectually to stem the flames.

Larry knew what to expect even before he reached the warehouse. He had seen other cotton fires. There was no hope of salvage; let the outside of a cotton bale catch on fire and the flame eats its way into the very heart of the fleecy staple and there may smolder and burn for weeks. Once fire seizes cotton there is no extinguishing it.

The warehouse was a sorry sight. Some of the bales had swelled under the water poured on them and burst their steel ties. Others stood in disarray, the sides smoking and the jute bagging completely burned off.

There was no great flame but a steady column of acrid smoke rising that even immersion in water would not stem and the streams poured on by the single fire company seemed puny.

Larry was too stunned for a time to ask questions. He stood with head down gazing vacantly at what had been cotton a few hours before. There had been a fortune in that warehouse; now it was not worth the moving.

Mary Ruth crowded close to him and tried silently to comfort him. Larry paid no heed to her, but continued to look with stony gaze on the ruin of his hopes. It would no longer be possible to justify himself to the farmers of Aarons County who had entrusted their cotton to him.

There could be no justification now; their worst fears had been realized. The cotton was worth only the insurance he had carried and this was at the market price of the staple on the day that it was burned. Larry knew what that had been. Cotton was quoted at a fraction over fourteen cents.

He stirred from his torpor after a moment and began asking questions. How it started? Who had found it? Had they saved anything? Were the office records all right?

The men who worked cautiously in the cotton could tell him little. Mary Ruth kept at his elbow, but she did not speak. Later she would comfort him with words, but now there was only an occasional hand on his elbow.

And then they saw approaching them from the direction of the depot a little group of men who quickened their pace at the sight of Maynard. He recognized Evan Shelby first and afterward the others. Henry Grider, Afton Gilchrist, Maxwell Berry, and Sheriff Lyman Hollis.

Larry stirred a little from his coma of despondency as he saw them. He spoke to Grider.

'This is hell!' He motioned toward the ruins behind them. For a moment he had no eyes for the others, but Mary Ruth at the sight of their stern faces took vague alarm. She had an impulse to stand between them and Larry and suppressed it in wonder. Grider answered soberly.

'I'm 'fraid 'tis, Larry.'

'How could it have started?'

Berry answered harshly. 'That's what we are tryin' to find out.'

Sheriff Hollis spoke softly: 'Where was you last night, Mr. Maynard?'

'Why — why, at home, of course?'

'Was he, Miss Mary Ruth?'

'Certainly,' answered Mary Ruth. 'Where else should he be?'

'Wait a minute, Lyman,' Grider interrupted. 'This ain't the place to start that. Let's go up to your office an' then we can all talk comfortable like.'

The sheriff turned on his heel with a curt affirmative. The others followed him and Mary Ruth pressed closer to Larry.

'I don't know what it's about, but I'm going along,' she whispered.

Larry nodded assent; he was as much in the dark as she. He would have liked to ask questions about the fire, but the men's manner did not encourage that. Even Grider was sunk in unusual taciturnity and his face appeared tired. Larry became vaguely alarmed; there was something sinister about the purposefulness of the men's demeanor.

'Sit down,' Sheriff Hollis spoke curtly and jerked a thumb toward a chair. A little more graciously he pushed forward a seat for Mary Ruth, whom he addressed. 'You say Mr. Maynard was at your house last night. Can you swear to that?'

'Certainly.'

'He didn't leave the place at all?'

'Why, yes. He came to Lebanon about nine

o'clock. He had some work to do at the warehouse.'

The men exchanged glances. 'What time did he return? Do you know that?'

'Why, no. I must have been asleep when he got back.'

'How do you know he came back then?'

'Why, he was there this morning. Why do you ask all these questions?'

'Never mind,' the sheriff said grimly. 'You just answer them, please, ma'am, an' try to keep your memory straight.'

Larry moved at that and Grider put out a hand quickly. But he did not stop Larry's speech.

'Suppose you ask me those things,' he said. 'What are you driving at?'

'I'll come to you in a minute, young man. Keep still till I do. Now, Miss Mary Ruth, to come right down to it, you don't know where he was between nine o'clock last night and daybreak this morning. Do you?'

'No-o, I don't,' she admitted reluctantly.

Hollis turned to one of his deputies. 'Get the can, Jim.'

The man brought from behind a desk a five-gallon milk can. Sheriff Hollis rolled it forward until its battered sides stood in the light. 'Ever see that before?' he asked.

Mary Ruth looked at it indifferently. Then she leaned forward for a closer look. On one side of the can some one had taken a nail and in dents had worked out a large 'Y.'

'Why, yes. That's one of the cans we use to keep the skim milk for the hogs.'

'It belongs on the Yates plantation, don't it?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You're positive of that?'

'Why, certainly.'

Again the group of men exchanged significant glances. Their faces hardened. Shelby threw a look at Maynard who was gazing blankly at the can. He was giving one half of his mind to the questions. He was still numb from the shock of the fire and bewildered at the attitude of the men. Mary Ruth's perceptions were quicker and her brows had drawn together.

Sheriff Hollis reached into his pocket and drew out a pair of pliers. He extended them toward her.

'Ever see those before?'

Mary Ruth shook her head and leaned forward for a closer look. 'No, I never ——' she began and stopped.

'Well,' prompted the sheriff.

Mary Ruth did not answer. She turned her eyes for a moment on Larry.

'I see you know them,' said Hollis.

'Y-yes,' she whispered.

'Where did you see them last?'

'In — in the car.'

'In your car?'

'Yes.'

'How do you know them?'

'One jaw has some teeth broken down.'

Hollis threw the tool on the table and turned to the men. 'I guess that's enough,' he said. 'An open and shut case.'

'Wait a minute, Lyman,' objected Grider. 'You ain't asked him nothin' yet. Don't be so swift.'

Larry was paying heed now. He pointed at the can and the pliers. 'Where did those things come from and what's all this about?' he demanded.

Grider answered slowly. 'They was found outside the warehouse this mornin'. That there fire was set in a half a dozen places with gasoline and this was what they used to carry the gasoline in.'

Larry laughed angrily. 'What the hell has that to do with me?'

'A good deal, I'm thinkin',' said the sheriff softly.

'You think I set that fire?'

'Yes,' Hollis said bluntly.

Larry laughed shortly. 'That's the biggest fool thing I ever heard,' he said angrily, and turned to look at the others. Their faces were hard and their eyes were accusing. For the first time he realized the gravity of his position.

'Why should I burn the warehouse?' he asked derisively. 'I had more at stake than anybody else to see that the cotton was safe.'

Evan Shelby heaved his monstrous shape to his feet. 'Maybe you did an' maybe you didn't,' he said. 'We might's well have a showdown right here. I've had cotton in that warehouse an' I trusted him just like you all did up here till lately — till he began to

ship cotton out of here. That never did look good to me.'

'But it was the mill's cotton,' objected Larry. 'I showed Berry over there the cotton I was shipping.'

'Yeah, you showed him. It's easy enough to show cotton.'

'But the records will show what cotton I've shipped.'

'Them records was all burned up. The feller what set the fire took good care they would be. That's what made me twice as suspicious. You been shippin' more cotton out of that warehouse'n you been lettin' on an' you got wind that we was in behind you an' you figgered burnin' up the place was the cheapest way of stayin' out of jail.'

Larry turned to Grider. 'Do you believe that?' he asked desperately.

'No,' said the banker. 'But you got to admit that it looks bad.'

'It looks so damn bad that I'm goin' to lock him up so's he won't have no chance to take leg bail,' announced Hollis.

'You mean you're going to put me in jail? Where is your warrant?'

'I'll swear to it,' said Shelby promptly. 'Won't be a mite of trouble about that.'

'Then I want a lawyer and I want a chance to make bond,' cried Maynard.

'Want and be damned!' said Hollis. 'Who the hell do you think you are to be sayin' what you want? If you got what you deserved ——'

'Now, now, Lyman, I'm goin' to see that the boy gits his rights,' Grider interrupted mildly. 'He's presumed to be innercent till he's officially proved guilty an' it don't do no good to jump to conclusions.'

'I'm going to lock him up just the same,' said the sheriff.

'I guess you kin if you set your meigs to it,' admitted Grider.

'What do you want me to do, Larry?' Mary Ruth interrupted. 'You know I don't believe anything like this.'

'There isn't much you can do,' Larry answered soberly. 'You mustn't worry. I'll get out of this when these people come to their senses. I'm not guilty, you know.'

There was a moment of silence. Maxwell Berry spoke harshly. 'This is what we git for trustin' to outsiders. He's cost this county nearly a half a million dollars. I hope he goes to jail for life and I'm goin' to do every damn thing I can to send him there.'

Larry and Mary Ruth ignored him. They had eyes only for each other. Hollis rose and motioned to Larry to precede him. 'Git on downstairs,' he said harshly. 'I'll turn you in myself.'

'Don't you worry, Larry,' Mary Ruth cried. 'We'll be working for you every minute.'

The men were gentlemen after all and they turned away their eyes — all but Shelby. He looked on and his cheeks were creased in a fat smile until he felt Grider's gaze.

Mary Ruth listened to the echo of Larry's footsteps in the corridor. Her heart was in her face and Grider winced at what he saw. He touched her arm.

'Come on, honey,' he said. 'Come on over to the bank an' we'll kind of figger what we're goin' to do.'

In Grider's office, Mary Ruth spoke fiercely. 'I want him out,' she said passionately. 'I want him out so he can prove he's innocent.'

Grider shook his head slowly. 'I don't know,' he said doubtfully.

'Wha-at!' Mary Ruth stared at him. 'You mean you won't help get him out?'

Grider looked away for an instant and then turned his face back to her.

'Mary Ruth,' he said slowly. 'When Aarons County hears that Larry set that warehouse afire, I'm wonderin' if jail wouldn't be the safest place for him to be.'

As his meaning became plainer, Mary Ruth stared at him — horror in her eyes and her color fading.

CHAPTER XXV

WHEN Mary Ruth hurried into Larry's cell an hour after a surly trusty had turned the key behind him, she found him staring out the barred windows into the cheerless courtyard that separated the two wings of the jail.

At first Sheriff Hollis had brusquely refused to allow her to see Larry.

'Got any business with him?' the sheriff had demanded.

'Certainly.'

'What is it?'

'It's with him, Mr. Hollis.'

The sheriff grunted and turned an indifferent shoulder. 'You can't see him right now.'

'Why, Mr. Hollis?'

'You can't see him right now.' There was no shade of difference in the sheriff's tones.

It wasn't until Judge Fleetwood and Henry Grider had been summoned that a grudging consent was wrung from Hollis. Henry Grider spoke sharply.

'Lissen to me, Lyman. I know exactly what you're figgerin' on doin'. You're trying to honey up to Evan Shelby 'cause you an' him has allus been thick as thieves. Well, you needn't to think you ain't goin' to treat that boy right just 'cause you think it'll please Evan Shelby. Larry Maynard's my

friend an' Evan Shelby ain't the only man that can throw a few votes in Aarons County.'

Judge Fleetwood added his word. 'Yes, sheriff. I've been retained as the young man's lawyer an' I shall see that he has his rights. I think you'd better let the young lady see him — now or any other reasonable hour she asks you.'

Hollis yielded with poor grace and gave an ungracious order.

'Thank you, Uncle Henry,' Mary Ruth said. 'And you, too, Judge. I knew that you'd help me.'

'Want us to come with you?'

'No-o, I think I'd better talk to him first, please, Uncle Henry. He's going ——'

'Yeah, I know,' interrupted Grider with an understanding smile. 'It's allus better to have just two at them kind of talks.'

Mary Ruth flushed and did not answer. She followed the trusty down the corridor to the end where Larry had been placed in a cell away from the few other prisoners in the jail. Curious eyes peered at her out of the semi-darkness as she passed, but voices were quickly hushed in deference to her presence.

She found Larry staring at two chickens huddled with ruffled feathers in the diluted sunshine that filtered into the courtyard out of a gray sky. There was an ugly look on his face when he turned and his smile was crooked.

Their eyes met for a long moment while the trusty unlocked Larry's cell door and stepped back for Mary Ruth to enter.

'You got thirty minutes,' he said, and then with unexpected delicacy: 'I'll wait up at the other end.'

Larry tried to hide his emotion under inconsequential words. 'Come in,' he invited. 'Not very palatial quarters, but the best I have.'

But Mary Ruth had no time for trivialities. 'Larry!' she cried. 'What are we going to do?'

Larry did not answer for a moment. He took her arm and drew her over to the narrow steel bunk that ran along one side of the cell.

'The first thing is not to lose your head.'

'But I can't help it with you in here and the cotton all gone,' Mary Ruth choked. 'It's so different from what we planned and it happened so suddenly.'

'Yes, I suppose I should have expected this, but somehow I didn't.'

'What, Larry?'

'This end for the whole business. I came down here with some sort of a fool idea of showing them a new way of doing things and I wind up in jail.' He laughed shortly. 'The thing has its humor if you can appreciate it.'

Mary Ruth winced at his laughter. In her heart she echoed his words, but she had come to comfort him and not to add fuel to his bitterness.

'Are you going to admit failure?' she asked gently.

Larry gestured at the bars that surrounded them. 'I am,' he said definitely. 'I'm no hog. I know when I have enough. For all of me, Aarons County can go to bankruptcy or the devil in its own way. I'm through.'

Mary Ruth laid a hand on his arm. 'I know, Larry.'

'I looked forward to coming back here for fourteen years,' he went on with increasing bitterness. 'My God! If I had only known. I was pretty proud when I came back with Cade-Reynolds's money behind me. I thought I could do pretty nearly anything. I looked on myself — hell, and now I'm in jail and I'll be lucky if Evan Shelby doesn't send me to the penitentiary.'

'I hate him!' Mary Ruth cried. 'I hate him. Why, he said up there in the office, that you had been stealing their cotton.'

'Yes. I underestimated Shelby.' He laughed grimly. 'It's a pretty costly mistake.'

'Larry, what can I do?'

'There isn't much to be done until I can get out of here.'

Mary Ruth's eyes filled. She fought silently for a moment. 'Larry, I'm afraid.' Her hands caught his arm tight. 'I'm afraid, Larry.' There was a note of hysteria in her voice.

'You needn't be.' He purposely misunderstood her. 'No one thinks you had any part in it.'

'I didn't mean that. I mean about you!'

'Nothing's going to happen to me. I'm not guilty. I didn't set fire to the warehouse and I'll find some way to prove it when they arrange bond for me.'

Mary Ruth shivered. 'That isn't what frightens me. It's — it's the way the county feels. Why —

why, these men are crazy. And Mr. Shelby is making them worse. I heard him on the streets just now when I went for Judge Fleetwood. I'm afraid they'll come after you here, Larry.'

So she knew that! Larry's face darkened as he stared somberly at the floor. He had hoped to keep the knowledge from her.

It was true. He knew that. He had read it in the deadly malevolence that had lighted Shelby's cold eyes an hour before in the sheriff's office. In that moment Larry realized with a thrill of panic that his life was the stake for which Shelby played. Shelby wouldn't be content now merely to run him out of the county as he had threatened. Larry knew too much; his mouth must be closed.

Larry used the ugly word without a quiver. They might lynch him. With Shelby to point the way, Aarons County's anger would demand blood to cool it. He had been sure before and what she told him made him more certain. Shelby was pouring gasoline on an open fire.

Mary Ruth's face was pinched and wan as she watched him. 'Larry, what can I do?' she demanded again. 'I came to help you.'

He must put on a brave front for her sake. He tried to make his words convincing.

'Things aren't as bad as you fear. We've Henry Grider, and Cade-Reynolds will send some one to help.'

'I don't want to leave you here alone!'

'I know. But we'll just have to do the best we can.'

'That's what I came to do. I'm going to have a part in this with you, Larry. You're in trouble because you tried to help Mother and me. That's what turned Mr. Shelby against you. I know. It's our fault and now I can't do anything.' Her voice was desperate. 'Larry, I've got to do something.'

'Don't feel like that. It isn't necessary. Evan Shelby would have hated me if I had gone somewhere else. We started that years ago when I was a boy.'

He was afraid she would break down, but instead she grew calmer. She rose and for a moment stood looking out the window into the bleak courtyard. Her fingers where they rested on the bars for a moment were steady.

'Larry, I said I meant to have a part in this with you. I'm going to share whatever happens.' She was speaking gravely, weighing each word. 'Evan Shelby is working against you in the county. I want the right to work for you.'

'But you have that.'

She shook her head. 'No. My interest in you might be misunderstood. That must not happen. Aarons County must know why I am working for you.'

'How do you mean?'

'Mr. Shelby is appealing to one kind of people in the county. I'm going to appeal to the other.'

'Shelby is a hard man to fight.' Larry's smile was twisted. 'You'll find them hard to convince.'

'I know it.' Mary Ruth's face was very grave. 'There is one thing that would convince them.'

‘What?’

Mary Ruth flushed. For a moment she hesitated and her eyes turned from his. Then she straightened; her head lifted proudly. ‘If we — if I were to tell them that you and I were going to be married,’ she said quietly. ‘They would listen to me then.’

Larry’s fingers closed on her arm and Mary Ruth cried out in pain. His face was lined and gray.

‘No! I won’t have you do that!’ he cried vehemently. ‘You — it isn’t fair to you.’

‘You love me, don’t you, Larry?’

‘Love you! I’ve always loved you. Don’t you see that’s why I’m not going to let you do this?’

‘But you do love me, though, Larry?’ she asked steadily.

‘I love you too much for that!’

‘Don’t you think I would be rather despicable if I flinched now when you need me? I — I might turn the scales; I — I might, why, Larry, don’t you see that now is the time for me to take my place by your side?’

‘But ——’

She did not heed his interruption. ‘This is no time for false modesty. You love me and I — I — well . . .’ Her smile was misty and her eyes filled. ‘Mother has seen. And she has blessed me and blessed you. She sent me here to you not an hour ago when she came in answer to my message. We’re only two women, Larry, but we love you and — and perhaps we can do more than men could. We want the right.’

Larry threw his hands wide. 'You tempt me! It would be so easy to be cowardly and try to hide behind women's skirts. And afterward I'd — I'd hate myself. It's too big a risk for you to take, Mary Ruth.'

'Risks!' Mary Ruth's exclamation was scornful.

Larry stood a moment with bowed head. When he lifted his face to the window he was again composed; the iron restraint that he had imposed on himself at the first sight of her settled on him again.

'Listen to me, Mary Ruth. You've been swept off your feet because this thing happened suddenly. Let's face the facts squarely. I may go to the penitentiary if I'm lucky; that's because Shelby has made it so that any jury in Aarons County would find me guilty in five minutes. Then there's that other — they may not wait for the law.'

'I know! That's why ——'

'In either case it isn't right for me to let you become too closely identified with me. You haven't realized yet the full force of the county's hostility; I've had a taste of it.' His voice shook, for he was human and felt trapped and helpless. 'It's going to be ten times worse now. Shelby might turn against you. You can't have that. He'll stop at nothing.'

'He may find that neither will I.'

'But you're only a girl and — I can't let you tie yourself to a man who may be a convict in a month if he's fortunate or who may — may be taken out of here to-morrow. You should go back to the plantation and leave these things to Grider and Fleet-

wood and me. Besides, there's Cade-Reynolds ——'

'None of them can help you like I can,' she said passionately. 'What about me? Suppose I did that and something happened that I might have prevented? How do you think I'd feel? I'd hate myself all my life.' Her voice sank to a deeper note. 'If you tell me that you don't love me and that you don't want me, then I'll have to do what I can without it. But, Larry, don't condemn me ——'

Larry could endure it no longer. He leaned forward and swept her into his arms. She yielded herself to him frankly as her arms went hungrily about him and she hid her face on his shoulder.

There was no need for words. He could feel her body trembling and her shoulders shook while her arms tightened about him. Over her shoulder he stared into the jail corridor to where the waiting trusty drowsed in a chair.

God! He hadn't meant to tell her like this. He'd meant to go to her proudly and put at her feet the things that he had wrung from the earth. . . . Pride . . . and it came like this.

He raised her gently and peered into her face with tender eyes. 'We'll face it together, sweetheart,' he said.

'Oh, Larry! I'm — suppose I should lose you when I've just found you!'

'We won't think about that, dear,' he said soberly. 'We'll find a way out between us.'

'You're not going to be lonely here!' Mary Ruth's voice was fiercely possessive. 'Mother and I

are coming in to stay with Uncle Henry so that we'll be close to you. We're going to take care of you.'

They comforted each other. There was not much talk between them...incoherent sentences...murmured endearments....Foreboding hushed as quickly as voiced....'You-all got five minutes mo'.' It was the voice of the trusty from the corridor. Mary Ruth straightened.

'Now tell me what I must do before I go,' she begged.

'Shelby set the fire or had it done,' Larry answered thoughtfully. 'Our best hope is to strike at him before he can do anything. We've got to see what he was doing the night of the fire if we can.'

They clung to each other when the trusty came. 'I'll be back to-morrow,' Mary Ruth whispered. 'Don't be lonely.'

'How could I after this?'

They kissed each other soberly.

'Please, Miss, I 'specks you better go,' the trusty besought.

Mary Ruth followed him. Looking back for one last glimpse, she carried with her the picture of Larry pressed against the bars of his cell, his eyes on hers and one hand lifted in a gesture of farewell.

CHAPTER XXVI

OVERNIGHT the little town filled with strangers: detectives sent by the insurance company; men from the State law enforcement department at Montgomery; a detective from the warehouse department; the State fire marshal; a federal inspector from Mobile; insurance adjusters, for the farmers of Aarons County were clamoring for their money.

'And not a one of them is doing a thing, Uncle Henry,' complained Mary Ruth to Henry Grider. 'Every last one of them comes in here, asks a few questions, looks at that milk can and doesn't do anything toward finding out who really started the fire.'

Henry Grider soothed her as best he could. There was little he could tell her. The reason for the inaction of the officers was plain. One and all they thought that Larry Maynard had fired the warehouse and with the man responsible in jail there remained little for them to do.

'The man from Cade-Reynolds is just as bad as the rest of them,' Mary Ruth said. 'I believe he thinks Larry did it just as the rest of them do.'

'I'm 'fraid he does,' admitted Grider. 'I been doin' a little inquiren' round and the notion is pretty general all over the county that the right man is in jail. I guess the folks is pretty riled 'bout it. I've tried to talk some reason into 'em when they come in here to collect their insurance money, but they

just listen an' you can see 'em settin' back in the britchin' just like a balky mule.'

Mary Ruth was disappointed in Cade-Reynolds and Company and in the detective they had sent to help Larry. At Larry's request she and Henry Grider had telephoned an account of the fire and the arrest of Maynard to Alex Cade at Greenville. She had expected him to come to Lebanon, but instead he had listened to her story until she finished.

'You say he's in jail?' asked the reedy voice over the telephone.

'Yes, sir, and he needs help,' Mary Ruth said earnestly. 'We are doing everything we can, but there doesn't seem much to be done.'

There was a moment's silence from the other end of the wire and then Cade said deliberately: 'Well, I'll see what we can do. If he's in jail I'll arrange through Grider for bond for him and then he can come up here and we'll talk it over. There'll be plenty of time after his preliminary hearing.'

Mary Ruth was chilled. 'Aren't you coming down here to help him?' she asked.

'I can't get away right now, Miss Yates,' Cade said — indifferently, she thought — 'and besides, there isn't anything I can do. I'll send somebody from the office to help. Do you need a lawyer for him?'

'No,' said Mary Ruth. 'We'll get a lawyer for him here. There's nothing you can do, sir. Thank you. Good-bye.'

Mary Ruth was indignant when she hung up the

receiver. That was the way they treated him and he had worked for them for ten years. Well, she had a few friends in Aarons County who would help her and help him.

Mary Ruth saw Larry every day and tried vainly to cheer him by pretending optimism. Neither was deceived.

'We're trying to find where Mr. Shelby was the night of the fire,' she said. 'But nobody seems to know. There doesn't seem to be anywhere to start.'

'They all think I did it,' said Larry grimly. 'That's why nobody's paying any attention to him. He started the fire. Somebody who had a grudge against me did it and he is the only man with whom I've had trouble. He's the key to this thing.'

'Why should Mr. Shelby hate you so?'

'I don't know, but I suspect. It was about your plantation. Shelby didn't want me to have your place. He wanted you to run it and let him have the marketing of your cotton. That's why he loaned you money — so that you wouldn't go to anybody else to sell your cotton. You trusted him too much. Then I came in and he made up his mind to get rid of me. It looks like he has a good chance of succeeding.'

There was scant time between them for love-making. Mary Ruth's visits were limited and they were seldom alone. But Larry was warmed and comforted by her love.

'If it wasn't for you I'd see red and do something desperate,' he told her.

Urged by Mary Ruth, Judge Fleetwood went to see the solicitor, Hart Chamberlain, about bond for Larry.

'We've got to get him away from here, Judge,' Mary Ruth pleaded. 'Until the county calms down.'

Judge Fleetwood had sensed the temper of the farmers. 'I guess you're right. It ain't safe for him to be here.'

But Chamberlain would listen to no suggestion of bond. 'Not a chance,' he said. 'I'm callin' a special session of the grand jury pretty soon. I'm going to rush his trial. Ain't no need for bond for him. Let him stay in jail.'

'But he's only charged with second degree arson and that is a bailable offense,' Judge Fleetwood argued.

'Don't make any difference. He got away with close to a half-million dollars' worth of cotton. Think I'd give him half a chance to skip the country?'

'That leaves us only the recourse of habeas corpus then. We'll force you to let us have a reasonable bail.'

'Go ahead an' try it an' see what good it does you,' Chamberlain challenged. 'You try that an' even if the judge lets him have bail, I'll appeal to the supreme court an' he'll have to stay in jail till it's settled. I'll have him on his way to the Madison penitentiary before then.'

So Larry chafed and fretted in his cell and beat himself vainly against the bars. Mary Ruth virtu-

ally lived in Lebanon, giving only the scantest attention to the plantation. She was perplexed by the absence of Buck Farley. She told Larry about it.

'He's just disappeared,' she said. 'Nobody knows where he is. He hasn't been back at the place since the night of the fire.'

She didn't tell him what Aarons County was saying about Buck Farley's disappearance, for somehow it had become known. Aarons County said that Maynard had hired Farley to help set fire to the cotton and then leave the county.

'I put Giles in charge up at the commissary,' Mary Ruth said. 'There isn't much to be done, except wait on the negroes and keep an account of what goes out. But I can't understand Buck. He never did anything like that before.'

'It's got something to do with the fire,' said Larry instantly. 'It looks to me like Shelby hired Buck to start the fire and he's gone for good. You find Buck Farley and you'll get the key to the riddle. He did not plan to be gone. Remember, the night of the fire he wanted to get off early so he could come to Lebanon. He was planning then on what he was going to do the next day.'

The detective from Cade-Reynolds reached Lebanon and Mary Ruth was bitterly disappointed. He introduced himself as Horace Gates and then did nothing in a mysterious and exasperating way.

Mary Ruth, herself, worked night and day. The milk can and pliers were the principal links against Larry and her first effort was to trace these.

But not a whisper could she get. She questioned the stable hands about the milk can, but none of them remembered seeing it. It was no different from a half-dozen others used daily in hauling milk to the hogs in the lower pasture. It had been taken, of course, but no one had missed it.

The quest of the pliers was hopeless. Larry might have dropped them himself. Either that or they had been deliberately stolen to throw suspicion on Larry.

Her loyalty to Larry was fierce and combative. She flaunted it in the face of the county and although discouragement shook her she continued her search for some clue that would free the man she loved.

The depths of her nature were stirred. She had never thought of herself as easily moved, but now there was something passionate in her devotion to Larry. Powerful, successful, bending the county to his will, he could never have stirred her as he did now — helpless, in prison and a pariah in the eyes of the county.

Her love broke the restraints of her quiet nature and she was tireless and fearless in his behalf. There was a sort of savage zest to her work for him.

Larry wanted for nothing. Mary Ruth and her mother wrung a grudging consent from Sheriff Hollis that they might fix up Larry's cell. Linen, blankets, a gay counterpane, a bright-colored curtain for the barred window, she and her mother brought him.

They would not hear of his eating the coarse jail fare of fat bacon and cowpeas with a hunk of greasy

and soda-streaked cornbread. Thrice daily a tray went to his cell from the dining-room of the Lebanon House.

Mary Ruth couldn't understand Grider's indifference and upbraided him with it until he lost patience.

'Maybe things ain't always what they seem,' he said tartly. 'That's the second time you've made that mistake. You made it about Old Man Cade an' now you're makin' it about me.'

'I don't understand.'

'No, I reckon you wouldn't.' Grider was still wrathful. 'Think you're the only one that cares about whether that boy gets out or not. I'm makin' out like I ain't doin' anything so's nobody won't get uneasy or suspicious. Same with Old Man Cade. He an' I've had four men in this town workin' on that fire since the day after it happened but we ain't advertised it any. That man you saw from Cade-Reynolds was just a scarecrow. He wasn't meant to do any work.'

'Oh, Uncle Henry, I'm sorry,' Mary Ruth cried. 'What did they find?'

'Nothin'.' Grider's broad face was seamed with lines of worry. 'That's what's got me frettin'. They ain't found anything. Can't get a place to start. It's like Hollis said — an open an' shut case against young Maynard. You an' I know he never burnt that warehouse, but how you gonta convince a jury of these wild-eyed fools from back on the river — specially when they're egged on by Shelby. I

never knew losin' a little money would make him so pizen mean.'

Mary Ruth felt better after that. She lost her feeling of isolation, now that she knew others were working the same as she. But she did not slacken her own work. On Larry's advice she tried to find some word of Farley. He had gone to Lebanon the Saturday night of the fire and had disappeared. Nobody had seen him since.

She and Grider and Judge Fleetwood waited for feeling against Maynard to subside but instead it grew more intense. The cotton market was responsible for that. The break which Larry had foreseen and so confidently predicted came a week before Christmas. And as he had foretold the spark that set the market into hysterics came from England.

Final figures on the Egyptian crop showed it far under the early forecasts. India was almost a total failure. Export demand for cotton cloths had made heavy inroads into stocks carried by mills both in this country and in Europe. They began to buy.

The movement gained momentum from its own weight. It was the moment for which the great speculative interests in this country had waited. They had bought cotton during the rush of the season and had quietly stored it. Now they turned a deaf ear as American and European mills bid against each other for the staple with which to keep their spindles turning.

For three successive days cotton jumped the maximum allowed on the exchanges at New Orleans and

New York. This is two hundred points a day and the only reason the market stopped at the two-cent jump each day was because of the arbitrary ruling of the exchange.

In a week the quotation on middling rose from fourteen to twenty cents and reports of sale showed little movement. The mills were squeezed mercilessly. With the export and domestic markets clamoring for supplies they were forced to have cotton at any price and they bid recklessly.

A new factor entered the situation — Germany. German spinners, out of the world markets since the war, settled their strike and began to renew their takings. Hamburg shipments alone were sufficient to absorb the carry-over from the previous year.

It was the knowledge of this that had given Larry the confidence to hold to his cotton in the face of the early rises. He had watched the operations of the three big firms in this country who control the cotton markets of the world and he accurately interpreted their moves. He held cotton because they held cotton. In other words he hitched his tail on to their kite.

Larry in his cell swore bitterly to see his predictions thus fulfilled.

'Lebanon would be rich if the warehouse hadn't burned,' he told Mary Ruth. 'We had seven thousand bales in there. Cotton is now . . . Let me see . . . Montgomery is paying twenty-four cents to-day for middling and correspondingly up for the higher grades. The cotton was worth fourteen cents when

it burned. That's seventy dollars a bale. Now it's worth a hundred and twenty dollars a bale. That's a difference of fifty dollars a bale. That fire cost this county three hundred and fifty thousand dollars in hard cash. And Lord knows what it cost me.'

All Aarons County was busy with cotton mathematics and its conclusion was the same as that reached by Larry. Mary Ruth sensed the result instantly.

Instead of growing noisier as its anger mounted Lebanon and Aarons County grew quieter and more deadly. The tension was in the air and found no outlet.

Mary Ruth saw it and went to Grider.

'I know,' he said. 'I'm worried to death. We're sittin' on top of a powder keg. Ain't nothin' needed but a match to start God knows what in this county.'

It was Saturday afternoon. Mary Ruth had watched the streets all afternoon. There was something terribly familiar about the sight of the little eddying groups on the sidewalks. She had seen all day the men drifting into town, faces stern, eyes hard, uncommunicative.

No women were with them. They came alone in battered automobiles, on horseback, in muddy buggies, and a few of them trudging on foot. There was a quiet purposefulness about them. They did not laugh. Once in Lebanon they drifted to the courthouse square, there to exchange low-voiced greetings and stand about in small groups. They were

waiting for something. Mary Ruth knew what it was — darkness.

Grider came to the window and surveyed the crowd in the square with a worried frown. 'I don't like the looks of it a bit.'

Mary Ruth gave way for a moment. She turned toward him swaying a little. 'Uncle Henry,' she said thickly. 'I'm afraid, afraid of them out there.'

'So'm I. But, honey, there ain't a thing we can do.'

'Have you seen Sheriff Hollis?'

Grider smiled wryly. 'Yes. He won't do a thing. I think he'd be kind of glad if they took Larry out an' hung him.'

'That's what they're planning, isn't it?'

'I'm afraid 'tis.'

'Uncle Henry!' There was a note of hysteria in her voice. 'Do something! We can't stand here and let that happen!'

'I know it. I've done everything I can. I've appealed to the sheriff to take some steps before it's too late. He looked at me out of them fish eyes of his: "Oh, I don't guess there's any likelihood of trouble," he told me. Like as if I was blind. There's just two men in this county who can stop this thing now it's gone's far as it has.'

'Who are they, Uncle Henry?' she asked feverishly.

'Evan Shelby's one of 'em an' Major Dave Wilmot's the other. Shelby could make these fools over at the courthouse do somethin' and Major Dave

might talk some sense into these fellers that are pilin' in here from the back country.'

'Why don't you go to Major Wilmot?'

Grider looked at her in amazement. 'Lord, honey, I went long ago! Major Dave's in Montgomery an' won't come back till Monday morning.'

'And the sheriff won't do a thing?'

'Won't even put an extra guard at the jail to-night. If anything happens—' Grider's voice was grim — 'I'm goin' to send him to the penitentiary.'

'But that won't help us. Have you tried the governor?'

'I called him on the telephone an' he won't do anything 'less the sheriff tells him the situation's beyond his control. I tried to get him to order Hollis to take Larry to Selma, but he wouldn't even do that. Says it would be a reflection on the sheriff.'

Mary Ruth held her calm with difficulty. She looked about the room and her eyes were desperate.

'But what are we going to do?' she cried.

Grider looked over at her and she saw his face for the first time. 'I'm goin' to do what I can. I've got the three men Cade-Reynolds sent down. I've got three or four more that I can depend on. We're goin' to be down at the jail to-night, if anything happens.' He turned despondently back to the window. 'But, shucks, if they really want to take him we can't do nothin' but git ourselves killed. We're goin' to be there, though, an' I guess we'll manage to git a toothful while they're gettin' a bite.'

Mary Ruth swayed an instant on her feet. One

hand was lifted to her mouth. She seemed to be thinking.

'Evan Shelby's our only hope,' she burst out at last. 'I'm going to him.'

Outside, she ran to the Shelby building and up the stairs to Shelby's office. It was dark. She stood a moment in thought and then ran down again.

Once in her car, she turned into the River road that led to the Shelby plantation and with reckless disregard of consequences pulled the throttle of her car as far down the arc as it would go.

CHAPTER XXVII

BUCK FARLEY'S voice broke on a shrill note of abject pleading. 'I tell you for the fifty 'leventh time, Mist' Shelby, that I ain't got them gin numbers an' I don't know nothin' 'bout who did git 'em. 'Twan't me. Lemme out of here, please, suh. You done kept me here more'n a week now an' I wants to git away.'

Shelby looked at him in baleful silence and Farley renewed his pleading. 'I ain't done a thing to you, Mist' Shelby. Not a solitary thing. An' you go an' treat me this-away. I ain't holdin' it 'gainst you, but please, suh, lemme go now.'

Shelby was inexorable. 'You ain't goin' to git out uh this house till I git them gin numbers. I want 'em and I'm goin' to have 'em if I have to kill you and bury you on Buzzard Hill. I brung you here to git them numbers on the Yates's cotton for last year an' here you're goin' to stay less'n you go out feet fust.'

They were reënacting a scene that was familiar through daily repetition. There was something pitiful about Farley's fear — until he looked up furtively to see if Shelby was impressed by his hysterics. Then for an instant the light of unquenchable hatred showed in his little close-set eyes.

He had endured the worst that Shelby could inflict — mental torture and physical brutality — and instead of cowing him it had driven him to calculat-

ing madness that counted no consequences if he could destroy Shelby.

Farley mentally measured the distance between Shelby and himself, but his conclusion was the same now that it had been for more than a week. He wouldn't have a chance against Shelby even if the bigger man was unarmed. He had no desire to die uselessly and the memory of Shelby's iron fingers at his throat had told him the scantiness of his chances.

'I'll have to cut him down to my size with a pistol,' he concluded and gave it up to return to his cringing.

He had taken refuge in fright; in pleading; he had wept; he had begged; he had groveled. But behind the mask of terror — wary and venomous like a snake coiled to strike — he waited for the moment when Shelby should be deceived and his vigilance relaxed for an instant.

'Mist' Evan, how long you goin' to keep me cooped up here?' he whined. "'Tain't goin' to do you a bit of good, 'cause I don' know what you want to find out. Honest to God, I don't, Mist' Evan.' His voice broke on a sob. 'Don't you know if I did I would have told you long ago?'

Shelby's answer was unvarying. 'Where are those gin numbers for the Yates cotton?' He had hammered that question at Farley for more than a week since he had brought him to the house still unconscious from the blow Shelby had struck him as he turned to run that night at Lebanon.

Farley had not opened his eyes until long after

Shelby had made his dispositions. For a moment Shelby had been uneasy, but a finger at Farley's wrist reassured him. 'I hit him pretty hard,' he muttered. 'But the skunk ought not to have tried to run.'

Farley came back to consciousness with a cry for water. Shelby got it for him and then sat down on the bed and waited while the injured man drank in thirsty gulps. Farley moaned and fell back on the covers and began to toss. Shelby stood for a moment looking down grimly and then went out, taking the lamp with him.

When he returned he held in one hand a steel plough-chain and in the other a two-foot bar of iron that terminated at each end in a handcuff. It was a pair of shackles such as convicts were required to wear when working outside the walls of the Aarons County jail.

These Shelby snapped about Farley's ankles and then went to a corner of the room where he pulled back a gaudy quilt from a blacksmith's anvil. This he lifted with a mighty tug and carried it to the foot of the bed, where he tilted up one end and ran the trace chain through the center. The ends of the chain he looped over the shackles about Farley's ankles and then joined the two ends with a heavy padlock which he took from his pocket.

He straightened and drew the back of his hand across his face, for the anvil had taxed even his enormous strength. As for Farley, he might as well have tried to lift the corner of the house — as he found next morning when he woke to full consciousness.

Shelby looked around him carefully, drew out his watch for a hasty glance, muttered an oath, and then went out, locking the door behind him. Again in his car he drove swiftly toward Lebanon.

When daylight came and full consciousness returned to Farley, he looked out the window and recognized the barn he saw with a bitter curse. So Shelby had brought him to his own home! He even recognized the room in the dim light. An unused attic on the third floor. He looked about him and grinned sardonically. Shelby must have been expecting him.

He was tied to the bed, he found, after one futile effort to lift the anvil. He lay and debated whether to cry out. He thought of Shelby's face when he had turned to run and decided against the hazard. But his thoughts were busy as he lay and waited for Shelby's return.

It was far into the afternoon before he heard a step on the stair and the door opened to admit Shelby. He walked over to the bed and looked down with a lowering face.

'Now, I want those gin numbers,' he demanded.

Farley had gone through hell since then. He was helpless — Shelby told him about that. No need to yell for help. There was no one to hear him. And, besides, if he did . . . 'How'd you like to have a corn-cob tied in your mouth? Think you'd like it, hey? Then keep your damn mouth shut.'

Farley obeyed — not through fear, for he was past feeling fear, but because he believed Shelby

when he said there was no one to hear. He saved himself and fawned and begged and cringed . . . and bided his time.

He was beginning to lose his confidence that sooner or later Shelby would relax for a moment. Farley was desperately anxious to be free; what had Grimes and Sellers done? Nothing, he knew, or Shelby would have said something.

He sensed some crisis this afternoon when Shelby unlocked the chain that fastened him to the anvil. 'Get up,' he said curtly. 'Go downstairs.'

Farley went in little short, mincing steps made necessary by the hobble of the shackles. It was not the first time he had been taken downstairs for further baiting. Shelby seemed to have more confidence inside the walls of his bare office.

'Sit down,' Shelby shoved him into a chair and he cowered away and put up a supplicating hand.

'Don't you hit me no more, Mist' Evan,' he cried and sniffled. 'Don't you do it.' The words seemed to choke him; he wanted to spring at Shelby's fat neck as he had seen a dog do once. But . . . 'Don't you twist my arm, Mist' Evan . . .' His voice rose. 'I tell you I ain't — oh, for God's sake, Mist' Evan ——'

Shelby's face was saturnine. 'I'm tired of foolin' with you,' he muttered. 'Now you tell me where you've hid them numbers or I'll stomp your damn head in.' He brought down his foot heavily and Farley screamed.

'Mist' Evan, you're killin' me!'

Suddenly Shelby released him and returned to his chair where he sat down. 'That's a taste,' he said heavily. 'Time's gettin' short. You're goin' to tell me where those numbers are before you leave this room. Think it over.'

Farley nursed his hurts with little mutterings and slobberings, crouched up in his chair. How much more of this could he stand before he . . . But, by ~~God~~, when he got loose Shelby would pay for this. As for the gin numbers, that was to be his method of vengeance — that and the burning of the warehouse. He didn't care if he went to prison himself; if he did, he'd go for murder though. Before he left he would kill Shelby if it was the last thing he did.

Both men lifted their heads at the sound of an automobile that slid to a stop before the house, the brakes shrieking protest. Shelby looked at Farley and drew a revolver from his pocket.

'Keep still,' he said grimly. 'Maybe they ain't comin' here, but if they do we ain't goin' to answer. If you open your mouth, I'll fill it full of lead.'

It was after dark and Shelby had placed a lighted lamp on the table so that he could see better. Now he rose and blew it out with a sudden puff down the chimney. But the mellow flames from the fire in the grate lighted the windows.

They heard the clangor of the knocker at the front door. 'There ain't nobody here,' Shelby said. 'I've been eatin' in Lebanon an' bringin' your meals out here to you. They'll knock a long time 'fore they get in there.'

They waited; Farley tense and hopeful; Shelby calm and impassive, the pistol lying across his lap and his eyes unwaveringly on Farley's face. A wild scheme was forming in Farley's mind and he lowered his eyes to hide the light in them.

The pounding at the front door kept up. Then there were hurrying footsteps at the side of the house and on the veranda outside the door of the room where they sat.

Farley started at the sudden knock on the door. Then a voice was raised and he cursed bitterly at his disappointment.

'Mr. Shelby, let me in,' Mary Ruth demanded. 'I know you're here. I saw you blow out the lamp. Hurry. I need you to help me.'

Shelby spoke in a savage undertone. 'I've got to let her in. Here. Throw this laprobe over your legs and you keep quiet if you want to stay healthy.' He raised his voice. 'All right, Mary Ruth. I've got to find a match.' And then to Farley again. 'One move out of you and I'll finish you. You know too much.'

By the time the lamp was again lighted his face had smoothed and when he went to the door he welcomed Mary Ruth with his usual half-paternal air of benevolence.

'Come in, Mary Ruth. I thought you was some one else. Some one from Lebanon. I don't want to see nobody from in there this evenin'.'

Mary Ruth's face was white and she spoke in gasps as if spurred by desperate haste. 'That's what

I wanted to see you about.' She put a hand on his sleeve. 'Come back there with me now.'

'Wait a minute!' soothed Shelby. 'You ain't in that big of a rush. Come on in an' set down.'

Mary Ruth made a gesture of despair. 'But I haven't time. They were only waiting until dark and it's dark now. I've got to get back and you're going with me.'

'What for?'

'You know. They're going to take Larry out of the jail to-night.' Her voice rose. 'You know what they've done to other people in this county. They're going to — to lynch him.'

'How do you figger that concerns me?'

'Oh, don't pretend! I know you and Larry haven't gotten along very well, but you don't want to see him lynched, do you? Hung up to a tree without a chance, without a trial, and when he's not even guilty?'

Shelby's voice was measured when he answered. 'What happens to Maynard don't concern me no-ways. I seen my duty when he burned that warehouse and I done it — no more, no less. That's all I'm interested in. Nothin' ain't goin' to happen to Maynard.'

'I tell you there is!' Mary Ruth's voice was desperate. 'There is! And you can stop it. They'll listen to you. I don't care how much you disliked Larry, you wouldn't want that to happen, would you?'

'I've told you that I'm not concerned about the

young man. He made his bed and now let him lie on it. I've allus had to lie on mine.'

Mary Ruth thrust herself into the room. 'You've been my friend always, now ——'

She saw Farley for the first time and paused. Instantly her mind went to Larry's words. 'Find Farley and you'll find about this fire.'

'Why, Buck, where have you been?' she demanded. 'We've been worried about you.'

Farley glanced at Shelby. 'I been hurt, Mis' Mary Ruth,' he answered sullenly.

'They've been looking for you in Lebanon and I've needed you on the plantation.'

'Yes'm, I aim to come back as soon as I git well enough. I hurt my head pretty bad.'

But Mary Ruth had no time then for Farley. Afterward she could think what to do. Now all her thought was on Shelby and on what was happening back in Lebanon with the shadows drifting unobtrusively up from the depot toward the county jail on the other side of the courthouse square.

'Mr. Shelby, you've got to come,' she appealed. 'They're going to butcher him back there. And you can stop it.'

She did not see Farley edging up out of his seat. He had suddenly cast off his mask of fear. His eyes burned and his lean frame was tensed and poised. Shelby did not look at him and he edged toward the fireplace where there was a section of iron pipe used as a poker.

'I've got business right here to-night, Mis' Mary

Ruth,' Shelby said inexorably. 'What's happenin' in Lebanon ain't none of my affair.'

Mary Ruth sprang to her feet. 'You'll be sorry for this,' she said passionately. 'They're going to murder a man in Lebanon to-night and you could stop it. But you won't. I ——'

Farley spoke suddenly from behind her. 'We'll make him do it, Mis' Mary Ruth.'

He had risen, the laprobe that had covered his legs poised in one hand. He kept Mary Ruth between himself and Shelby.

At the sound of his voice, Shelby's blandness gave way.

'Damn you, Buck,' he said. 'You know what I told you.'

Mary Ruth's mind worked with lightning rapidity and as Shelby sprang sideways and threw out his pistol toward Farley, she automatically knocked down his arm as the gun roared and the bullet splintered the floor at her feet.

She was deafened by the explosion in the close quarters and little flecks of the powder burned her face. Farley shouted at her as he dodged back and forth with Shelby trying to shoot again over Mary Ruth's shoulder.

'He done it, Mis' Mary Ruth. He done it. You git me to Lebanon an' I'll stop that lynchin' with somethin' they can't dispute.'

He spoke rapidly; in broken sentences snapped out between desperate springs to disconcert Shelby's aim. Mary Ruth comprehended and believed. She

threw herself before Shelby and when he tried to brush her aside, she clung to his arm.

'He won't shoot me,' she shrieked at Farley. 'Get away! Go on to Lebanon! I'll hold him!'

But Farley did not run. He knew that would be fatal. Shelby would strike down the girl instantly and kill him before he had gone a dozen paces. But Shelby could not shoot through her and she had sense enough to stay between them.

They fought in silence in the half-light from the flames. A flirt of Farley's blanket had knocked the lamp to the floor and it had rolled to the hearth where the glass shattered and the spoiled coal oil burned with a blue flame.

No one paid it any heed. Shelby suddenly knew that his life was at stake. The knowledge did not make his hand any steadier.

He had never taken his eyes from Farley and he maneuvered to get a clear shot at him, but try as he would he could not shake off the girl's clutching fingers.

Sweat broke out on his face and he began to breathe hard. Farley heard and for the first time dared to hope. Mary Ruth heard nothing. She was too intent on keeping her grip on Shelby. As fast as he thrust her away she returned to claw and pull again.

They were never still. Shelby moved sideways trying to get away from Mary Ruth, and Farley in short hops managed to keep from under the muzzle of his pistol. Once Shelby snapped another shot at

Farley when he thought he had him cornered, but again Mary Ruth threw herself across his outstretched arm and the bullet ploughed up the floor harmlessly.

Farley and Mary Ruth exchanged glances as she looked over her shoulder. Her dress was torn, her hair disheveled and blood dripped from a cut in her cheek where Shelby had struck without mercy. But despite the blow she had clung to him and he had turned back to Farley just in time to force him back from the fireplace.

Shelby was growing desperate. He had gone blood mad as he realized that he must kill or be killed, for there was no mercy in Farley's face and Mary Ruth had no thought except to help Larry Maynard.

Mary Ruth had been right. To shoot her was unthinkable, but Shelby realized that he must get rid of her. He willed to live. A thousand schemes flashed through his mind as he fought to clear himself, his wary eyes on Farley.

Perhaps he could hide the body. He'd have to kill them both. It'd be simple once the girl was out of the way. He had to do it or they'd kill him. He had money. No one was on his place.

He was breathing in gasps. His laboring lungs would not support the tremendous strain of his monstrous body. He must do something and do it quickly.

He thrust Mary Ruth from him and in a last burst of strength sprang backward clear of her.

'Damn you,' he gasped. 'You would have it!'

He thrust his pistol forward but before he could pull the trigger, Farley struck. He had been poised and waiting for the moment when Shelby should turn his eyes away.

As he did so, Farley flung the blanket around Shelby's head and as Shelby clawed to free himself, Farley reached the fireplace in two tremendous hops. As he turned the piece of pipe used for a poker was in his hand.

It all happened in a breath. Mary Ruth scrambling up from the floor, her face drained of color by the realization that death had been very near. Shelby pulling away the blanket that cloaked his vision and turning toward the fireplace. Farley, his lean body stretched to its utmost height, and the piece of pipe raised in both hands. . . .

For an instant the scene was like a photographic plate on Mary Ruth's brain.

Then Farley struck with all his strength and Shelby seemed to wilt where he stood. His stertorous breathing halted; his pawing arms dropped; his knees buckled and he rolled on the floor, blood gushing from mouth and nose.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE men in the street in front of the county jail waited in ominous quiet, eddying into little groups that dissolved and formed again in the deeper shadows of the catalpa trees that dotted the courthouse lawn.

A single electric globe burned at either end of the jail wall and formed a pool of light, but they did not seem to avoid it. There was nothing furtive about them. Occasionally there was the murmur of voices as a question was asked and a monosyllabic answer returned. But mostly they were quiet.

They stood about idly, without any outward display of interest, looking now and then at the door that led into the office of the warden of the jail. At intervals they stood fully revealed in the glare from the headlights of an automobile. Invariably the car halted at either corner of the block in which the jail stood, waited for a moment, and then turned about and disappeared.

This was no thoroughfare to-night. Men who stood at the street-corners halted the automobiles and spoke a few quiet words to each driver. There was no argument and no explanation. The cars were turned and headed back the way they came.

But this happened at infrequent intervals, for Lebanon kept indoors this cold December night and purposely shut its ears to what was happening out-

side. It did not want to know. It wanted to be able to swear with a clear conscience.

It was not blind, of course. The significance of the grim-faced men drifting into town had not been lost. There was something in the wind . . . 'Better keep your folks at home to-night.' . . . 'Don't look for me over this evenin'.' . . . So the sinister whispers went.

Children were early herded, protesting, inside out of the darkness. Clint Mays closed his barber shop at seven o'clock. There hadn't been a customer in half an hour and usually it was crowded at that time of day. . . . The half-grown boys who loitered about the Lebanon drugstore for once spared the harassed proprietor their presence.

It was cold and the wind whistled in the bare branches of the catalpa trees. A sort of brooding hush settled down . . . even voices were lowered. . . .

And one by one those silent figures drifted in from the country. They spoke quietly to those whom they knew and who met their eyes. But usually there was scant recognition of them. Merely a blank stare or an averted head. Lebanon was looking into the future.

'Why, sir, 'ain't seen him since . . . lemme see, why I ain't seen him since the last time he brung in a bale of cotton an' put it in the warehouse. He took his receipts up to Mist' Grider at the bank an' come down to do a little tradin' at my place. Yes, sir. That's what I said, sir. I ain't seen him since.'

Lebanon and the county understood each other.

Never by chance did the one interfere with the other. The county had a way of making its displeasure felt. . . . Lebanon put up its shutters and hurried homeward in the early dusk. . . .

Henry Grider had waited as long as he dared, hoping that Mary Ruth might prevail on Shelby to aid them. Without it they were leading a forlorn hope and Grider read it in the very quiet of the men he saw on the streets outside the bank. If they had blustered; if there had been one or two who were drunk; if they had swaggered or boasted or flaunted their mission—he would have been less daunted. But these men were silent, looking straight ahead, and Grider's face grew more haggard as he recognized face after face. This was not the riffraff of Aarons County. These men were not marauders. They were small farmers who had been ruined in the destruction of the warehouse; substantial men who were respectable citizens. And in their steadiness he read an inexorable determination. Shelby might control them—he could not.

But though despair shook him, Grider made his preparations steadily and calmly. A man's life was at stake; an innocent man, he believed; a man whom he had come to respect and to love. With this man who was helpless was wrapped up the happiness of a woman whom Grider loved, too, and who loved the pawn in this deadly game.

A man came into the room and Grider turned.

Sylvester Burt had once been sheriff of Aarons County. When his term expired he had gone to

Birmingham and there had become the chief of the special police of a great coal corporation. Him and four of his men Grider had summoned the day after the fire at the warehouse.

'Find who did it an' never mind what it costs,' Grider had told him.

But Burt had failed and admitted it. Grider looked up expectantly as he came in now and a nod answered his question.

'They're movin' up to 'rd the jail,' said Burt. He was a tall man in muddy boots with a roll of a sweater about his long neck. His cheeks were brown and leathery and his eyes were startlingly blue in his wind-burned face.

Grider got up. 'All right. We'll go down an' make our play, then. You got the rest of the fellers with you?'

Sylvester Burt nodded. 'Yeah. The rest of them is outside. We been kind of circulatin' round in the crowd like you said. They ain't talkin'. But they're beginnin' to move up to the jail. I'm lookin' for 'em to start most any time now.'

Grider sighed. 'I ain't as young as I used to be. I feel kinda helpless at a time like this. Are the others all fixed?'

A grin split Burt's swarthy face. 'I reckon they be. They've all got forty-fives. I wouldn't let 'em bring shotguns like I'd have liked to have done. Ain't no use of eggin' 'em on.'

'Sylvester, didn't you find anything?'

Burt shook his head. 'Me an' them other boys

been workin' under cover ever since we come. An' the fellers from Greenville has, too. But there just ain't nowhere to start. Ain't nobody doin' no talkin'.'

The man was unbelievably casual. His voice was as steady as if he was ignorant of what lay before him. 'You ready to go through with it?' he asked, as Grider struggled into his overcoat.

'Ain't nothin' else to do, unless I can out-talk 'em. I don't figger I can. Get these men in a crowd and hide their faces an' they'll go twice as far as they would if they were actin' separate. There ain't nothin' more cruel nor more unreasonable than a crowd, Sylvester.'

In the outer office of the bank they found six men waiting for them. To these Grider spoke.

'Where's the sheriff?'

'He's at home.'

'Hidin', heh? Wants to be able to say he didn't know anything about it. Well, we'll fool him 'bout that. When I get through talkin', I want two of you boys to go down to his house and bring him up to the jail. Make out like they sent for him. He's goin' to take the responsibility himself an' I'm goin' to see that he does it.'

'You want the rest of us to stay outside?'

Now that the moment of action had come, Grider seemed younger. Indecision left him and he snapped his orders.

'I'm going in the jail office. The rest of you boys stay outside. I don't figger they'll do anything in-

side the jail. They'll want to take him out somewhere before they finish him. My guess is that they'll take him down to the warehouse. Us folks can't stop 'em from gettin' him out. Do you figger we can?'

There was a chorus of negatives. Grider's good-natured face was like granite.

'All right. We got one chance to win. Now I don't want you boys to go into this blind. Somebody's liable to get killed in this. An' it may be one of us. That's a chance we'll have to take. Also, and what's just as likely, one of us'll kill somebody. Now we ain't got no standin' in the eyes of the law. I asked that skunk Hollis to deputize you boys as a special guard for the jail an' he wouldn't hear to it. After things are over I'm goin' to Montgomery an' — but that's neither here nor there. The p'int is that you fellers want to know what you're goin' into. An' what chances you are takin'. Get me?'

'I ain't never drawed a hand yet an' laid it down when I thought it was a good un,' drawled Sylvester Burt. 'I guess you'll stand by us, won't you?'

'Stand by you? Why, dammit, I'm goin' to be with you.'

'I guess that's good enough for me. Suit you fellers?'

There was a chorus of assent. 'I'll depend on Cade-Reynolds and Company,' said a man from Greenville briefly. Gates was not among the men.

'All right then. That's decided. Here's the scheme: They'll take him out of the cell and bring

him out of the jail. Maybe they'll put him in a car an' maybe they'll figger on walkin' him if it ain't far. Anyway, they ain't goin' to be expectin' no jam once they get him outside the jail. That's when you fellers get busy. It's our only chance. Take 'em when they ain't expectin' it and get him away in the dark before they know who's done it or where. Understand?'

'Yes.'

'Sylvester, you pick out two of your men. Two big fellers. Put one at one side of the crowd and one at the other. When the door opens and they start to bringin' him out, I want each one of 'em to start a fight. Remember now. The minute they see that door open. Don't wait till they get to the steps with him. The minit that door opens, let 'em slough the nearest man. That'll take their attention off the door. You and the rest of 'em hit for the steps. Then's when you may have to use your guns. I'd take a blackjack in my left hand. Ain't no use in fightin' with cream puffs. An' you don't have to kill a man with a blackjack to get him outa your way. You fellers got 'em?'

'Sure. 'D just as soon be without my pants as my tickler.'

'All right. You gotta split that crowd an' you gotta get him away from 'em before they wake up. That ain't goin' to be so easy. It's gettin' him away from the fellers that's got him. They may handcuff him to one of them. If they do, take 'em both. An' Sylvester, don't shoot 'nless you have to, but if you

do, don't waste no bullets, 'cause you won't have time to reload.'

Another smile split Burt's dark face. 'When I miss 'em at arm's length, you better figger on takin' me down to the Old Folks' Home. I guess we got it straight. You all ready? You two better start after Hollis. Come on, Mr. Grider.'

Grider looked around him. His florid face was sallow and his hands trembled a little, but it was from excitement and not fear. It was as he said. He was not as young as he had been and he loved the boy who might not see the morning.

'One thing more, Sylvester. If you get him — no, when you get him, take him to my car. You know where it is. I'll come there as soon as I get away and we'll start for Selma.'

Grider snapped out the light and they went out one by one, Grider last. The courthouse was only a block away and beyond it the jail. They trailed across the courthouse lawn until they came to the outer fringe of the crowd.

No one spoke to them. In the darkness one man could not be known from another and their right to be there was not questioned.

Sylvester Burt pushed his way through the throng that gave back to his shoulder. There was authority in his bearing. His men kept together even in the gloom.

Burt halted almost at the threshold of the jail and motioned Grider forward.

'Wait 'till you see Hollis go in,' he whispered.

'Then you can foller him in. They ain't goin' to do nothin' without him. He's got the keys to the inside cell.'

They waited. Grider was not as patient nor his nerves as steady as the men about him and he fidgeted. Once he wondered where Mary Ruth was and what had detained her. He had forgotten about her until that moment. He was glad she was not there. She could not have endured the suspense of waiting.

There was another stir in the crowd and Sheriff Hollis came elbowing his way to the door. As he entered, Grider walked in behind him.

For a moment Grider was dazzled by the change from the darkness to light and then his vision cleared. He saw Sheriff Hollis walk behind the railing that separated the office from the anteroom, put down his hat and turn.

'They told me I was wanted up here,' he said pleasantly. 'What is it, gentlemen?'

Grider saw that the men in the room were masked with handkerchiefs carelessly knotted across the lower part of their faces, but the sheriff was apparently oblivious of this. One of the men, a lean man with cold blue eyes, stood forth as their spokesman.

'Good-evenin', Sheriff,' he said. 'Why, I guess you can favor us a little. You've got somebody in here that we'd sort of like to have.'

Sheriff Hollis looked them over before he answered. Grider crowded to the front.

'Visitin' hours are over,' said the sheriff. 'You'll have to come back to-morrow.'

'No. I guess we won't. We ain't figgerin' on makin' no social call. You've got a man in here that's pretty near ruined this county. He stole from us an' then he's burnt up what he couldn't steal. That's the man we want.'

Sheriff Hollis assumed to misunderstand. 'Have you a warrant or somethin'?'

'We got plenty of warrants,' was the imperturbable answer. 'Trot him out.'

'Let's see your warrants,' demanded the sheriff.

There was an imperceptible signal from the man. He, himself, did not move, but turned and pointed to the pistols that suddenly appeared in the hands of the men about him.

'There they are,' he said. 'They're signed by a northern gentleman by the name of Smith. His partner's named Wesson. An' if that ain't enough there's plenty more outside.'

Hollis looked over the men. Their eyes were hard. 'You've kind of got me at a disadvantage,' he said slowly. 'I guess there ain't nothin' I can do.'

'No, I guess there ain't. Take your gun out of the holster an' lay it on the counter with the butt toward me.' Hollis obeyed. 'Now put your keys beside it. Thank you. It pays to be obligin' sometimes an' these gentlemen can all testify that you was overcome by a superior force.'

Grider was sickened by the farce. Hollis had known what to expect. Come September he must

ask the county for votes again....Faugh! He crowded forward.

'Can I say a word?' he asked.

They had not noticed him before. Now the leader turned to face him. Hollis's face grew lowering. Grider moved toward the counter.

'Can I say a word, sir?' he repeated.

'Certainly, Mr. Grider. But I'd be much obliged if you'd make it quick.'

'Thank you. I'll be as direct as I can. I see you know who I am. I am glad for it gives my words weight they otherwise might not have. I'm here to appeal to you in the name of the law. Its representative —' and he threw a scornful look at Hollis — 'has failed signally in his duty. It is an omission that I shall call to his attention at a future time. But there's no use pretendin'. I know you're here to butcher young Maynard. I appeal to you for the good name of the county to do this thing accordin' to law. Now I could guess who you are. 'S far as that goes I could guess who most of the men are in this room. I ain't guessin' — yet. I'm hopin' that it won't be necessary, because if it does I won't guess.'

'I ain't heard an argument that's reasonable yet,' said the masked man.

'They are reasonable. They should be. You have nothin' to fear from the law. It will serve justice. This is not justice — to execute a man without trial. You do not know he is guilty and I tell you honestly I don't believe he is. I know he is not. The law is sufficient ——'

The masked man answered soberly and there was something terrible in his quiet. 'As to the law, Mr. Grider, you an' I both know that there's one law for one kind of folks and another law for another. If you've got money the law's on your side. If you ain't got money then maybe the law'll do. This feller in there — well, there ain't no use goin' over what he's done. You say he ain't guilty. I say he is. And it ain't no ways certain that the law'll ever do anything to him. He's got money, plenty of it. The corporation that sent him here to get our cotton as cheap as it could will stand by him. I've found out that already. They're down here fixin' to spend money to git him loose. Well, Mr. Grider, they can git him loose from the law, but they can't git him loose from us.'

'You ain't thinkin' straight. This man'll be tried before a Lebanon County jury. It's your law you're breakin' down. There ain't no tellin' where this sort of thing'll end. Maybe it'll be you the next time. Maybe ——'

The man laughed. 'If it is,' he said grimly, 'then I hope I get what he's goin' to get. No. Wait a minute.' He held up his hand to silence Grider. 'I know what you're goin' to say. You're wastin' your breath. I know what law is. Where does it come from? You talk about law. What's the source of the law? It's the people, ain't it? The sheriff acts in the name of the people of Aarons County. They're delegatin' their powers to him. Well, we're goin' to take it back into our own hands to-night. Aarons

County is out there to make sure that the law does take its course. I'm done talkin' and I'm done arguin'. If you think you know me, git me into court an' I'll show you how an Aarons County jury feels 'bout its law. Now git out of my way.'

He picked up the keys and advanced toward the steel door that led to the inner cells. Grider stood sturdily in his path and tried to speak. The man overbore him.

'I said git out of my way. That's twice I've told you. I ain't goin' tell you again.'

One of the men plucked at Grider's shoulder and he staggered back impotent. He had done his best. His only chance now was that Sylvester Burt would be successful.

There was only a moment's delay. The masked man unlocked the steel door and motioned for two others to follow him. In a moment they reappeared with Larry Maynard between them. His hands were shackled behind his back.

His face was ghastly, but his step was steady. His eyes went about the room and he would have spoken when he saw Grider, but the banker shook his head. A little color came back into Maynard's face at that: then he had not been entirely deserted.

The man with the keys locked the jail door behind him with meticulous care. The keys he handed to Sheriff Hollis.

'You'll get your gun later on,' he said pleasantly. 'Now, men, you know what to do.'

Grider slipped ahead of them and opened the door

and as the light streamed out, the crowd outside gave tongue. Maynard's haunted eyes sought his.

Grider's heart was pumping at a frightful rate. He seemed suffocating. He wondered at Larry's steadiness. The boy had courage. He wished he could whisper to him.

The roar of the crowd was savage; cruel. He had heard it before. Sylvester Burt . . .

Maynard was hustled onto the steps that led down from the jail. Grider crowded behind. Again the crowd gave tongue.

There was a rush forward. Grider wondered if he had miscalculated. Then he saw Sylvester Burt.

There was the solid sound of lead on flesh and a startled oath. From the outskirts of the crowd there were sudden commotions and an instant later the roar of a pistol fired at close quarters.

The running men came up to the group guarding Maynard, halted for an instant, then flowed over it.

There was a wild mêlée on the steps. Voices were raised in savage oaths. There was the sound of blows. Once a man screamed.

Grider found himself on the ground without knowing how he got there. Struggling men were rolling about him. He was knocked down when he tried to rise. . . . He listened for the sound of a shot, but none came.

The battle stopped as suddenly as it had begun and a voice was raised in a convulsed cry.

'Where's Maynard? They've got him and gone.'

CHAPTER XXIX

GRIDER clawed himself upright and found that he stood before the man who had been spokesman inside the jail. But the man's mask had been torn away and Grider saw that his ears had not deceived him. The man was Maxwell Berry.

Berry's mouth was cut and bleeding and there was a long gash in his scalp. He had clung to Maynard until a blow from a blackjack had snapped him off his feet as if he had been a child.

Berry looked down at Grider's clutching hand. 'Damn you, Grider,' he shouted. 'This is your doin'.'

'It is,' said the banker sturdily. 'Ca'm yourself an' quiet your pack. Then come inside an' we'll talk sense.'

'I want Maynard!'

'Well, you ain't goin' to get him, so you might as well forget it.' With the knowledge that Maynard by this time was safely away, he grew more assured. 'Quiet 'em,' he said and flipped a hand toward the men who were crowding up against the steps with incoherent cries of rage.

Berry put two fingers in his mouth and whistled sharply. There was an answering lull and faces turned up to him from the darkness below.

'I'm goin' inside here,' he shouted, 'an' see what's

to be done. You all wait out here. We ain't lost yet. We may still find where he is.'

They turned to go inside when from behind them came the notes of an automobile siren sounding short and continuous notes of warning. In a moment the car came into sight down Cedar Street in the direction of the depot.

Berry and Grider paused to watch. They saw the sentries at the street-corner move out to stop the car and then leap for safety when the machine roared past. There was the squeal of brakes suddenly applied, the scream of tires skidding on asphalt and the car careened drunkenly as the driver whirled it short around before the jail door. The crowd fled desperately to escape the wheels.

Mary Ruth Yates sprang out of the front seat. At the sight of Grider she cried out.

'We aren't too late, are we? They haven't done anything to him?'

Grider stared at her. 'What in the world is the matter, Mary Ruth? Your dress is ——'

Mary Ruth gestured impatiently. 'Never mind that. What about Larry? Is he safe?'

'Yes.' Grider glanced at Berry, who still was beside him. 'They took him out, but they couldn't keep him.'

'And he's gone? You got him away?'

'Yes. Where they can't get him.'

Mary Ruth swayed on her feet and sank down on the running board of the car. She asked no further questions. It was enough that Larry Maynard was

safe. But she rested only a moment. She turned to the car. 'Bring him out, Buck,' she ordered, and then to Grider, 'We've done it. Larry's safe for good now.'

The door of the automobile opened and Farley appeared, his head still wound with a dirty white bandage. His face was skinned and he limped when he moved. He turned and began to haul at something inside.

A man was disclosed; a man with a slender neck and a narrow face with a long nose and a high forehead. He hung back, but propelled by a force from behind, he shot into the open and was followed by the stocky figure of Monk Grimes. With Grimes on one side and Farley on the other, the stranger was marched toward the jail door.

'Who you got there, Buck?' asked Grider.

'Him?' Farley spoke with exaggerated slowness in calculated effect. 'Him? Why that's the feller that set fire to the warehouse.'

At that Berry laughed harshly. 'You cain't get away with nothin' like that,' he said. 'I know you're stallin' for time.'

'Come on inside here then an' I'll show you whether I'm stallin' or not. Move, you.' This last to the prisoner, who had stood looking nervously around the ring of faces that circled them.

The watchers offered no objection and followed by Mary Ruth they went inside the warden's office, where Sheriff Hollis still stood behind the grating, so rapidly had events marched. Buck Farley spoke to him.

'Sheriff, this here's the man that set fire to the warehouse.'

Hollis stared at them. 'Who — who is he?'

'A crook from down Montgomery way. I'm givin' him in charge of you an' statin' that I've got two witnesses that'll swear he's guilty of arson.'

'You'll have to do some explainin', Buck,' Grider said. 'My head's swimmin'.'

'Yes, and make 'em good,' Berry interrupted. 'What for should he set fire to the warehouse?'

'Now that's a horse of another color,' said Farley, who seemed to have lost all trace of his habitual cringe. His face shone with malicious joy as he paused in the door and turned a triumphant eye back on them. 'That's quite a tale, but I'm goin' to tell it to you soon's I git all my things ready. You, Ran!'

'Hey,' answered a voice from the automobile.

'Bring him in, too.'

Farley went out to the car, opened a rear door. 'Come on,' he ordered. 'Here's where you an' me git square an' cross off all accounts.'

He reached in and tugged and the monstrous form of Evan Shelby came through the door. Shelby was a wreck. The blood from the blow on his head had run down over his shoulder and caked and dried. His face was scratched and his pendulous lower lip had been bitten clean through.

He stumbled as Ran Sellers shoved him forward and there was the clank of a chain. He was wearing a pair of leg shackles similar to those worn by convicts working outside the jail.

Farley led Shelby toward the sheriff and thrust him forward. 'An' here's the man that hired this other feller to set fire to it.'

Shelby spoke thickly to Hollis. 'They've pretty near killed me, Lyman. Don't you believe nothin' Buck Farley says. Turn me loose.'

'Yes, sir, Mr. Shelby. I'll sure do it. And I'll tend to him later. But we'll have to saw off them leg irons.'

He pushed a chair forward and Shelby sank into it. Hollis hovered about him solicitously. Later he would ask questions. Now he was concerned only about Shelby. He handed him a glass of water and Shelby drank noisily.

Farley stood off and observed these proceedings with a sardonic smile. 'When I git through,' he commented, 'you ain't goin' to feel near so kindly to'rd that big hunk of meat. 'Twouldn't surprise me none if you didn't want to give a party for him like you was figgerin' on givin' for Cap'n Maynard.'

Shelby threw him a malevolent look. 'Lyman,' he said, pointing a trembling finger at Farley, 'I charge him with murder an' attempted murder, an' arson an' — an' — robbery.'

With feet apart, Farley cursed him, cursed his ancestors and his descendants; all the cumulated venom in the man's nature spewed to the surface and his words swished and cut until Grider silenced him.

'There's a lady here,' he said sternly. 'Close your trap. You can prove all this you're sayin'?'

'Reckon I'd of stuck my head in here if I couldn't

of?' Farley said, unabashed and still eyeing Shelby with undiminished rancor. 'Just ask me for my proof, that's all.'

Hollis put a hand on his shoulder. 'We're goin' to lock you up right now an' you can talk in the mornin' after Cap'n Shelby gits better. Then he——'

'No, there ain't nothin' like that goin' to happen,' said Grider dryly. 'I think the explainin' is up to Mr. Shelby. But we're goin' to the bottom of this right now. An' we're goin' to do it reg'lar.'

Hollis looked covertly at Berry, but he was staring at Shelby. Apparently satisfied by something he saw in the man's face, Berry nodded. 'Yeah, we'll do it reg'lar. Send for Solicitor Chamberlain an' his stenographer an' we'll hear from everybody.'

Outside the word went around that something had happened and details followed quickly. The temper of the crowd veered.

Grider, seeing one of his men whose battered face wore a look of satisfaction, beckoned to him. 'Go down to the first curve on the Selma road,' he ordered. 'Turn off into that little trail that leads into the woods. You'll find Sylvester Burt an' the rest of 'em there. Tell 'em I said come on back here to the courthouse. There ain't no need of their hiding out.'

When the solicitor arrived, a delegation from the crowd waited on him and at their solicitation he agreed to hear Farley's story in the courtroom where all could listen.

Shelby was brought in, as was the stranger and Buck Farley with Monk Grimes and Ran Sellers. It was almost like a trial. Shelby glowered in a chair at the table and at him now and then Farley threw a triumphant glance. This was costly; he knew he was going to the penitentiary and he didn't care. Shelby would be there before him and stay after he was gone. It was cheap at the price.

Chamberlain fussed with some papers, looked inquiringly at the stenographer and then nodded to Farley.

'All right, Buck. Tell your story.'

Farley swaggered forward, his lips drawn back from his protruding teeth in a pleased smile. He licked his lips in anticipation. The men who filled every seat in the courtroom leaned forward the better to fix their eyes on his face.

'This here bisness dates back to the time Cap'n Yates died an' Mis' Mary Ruth took over the place,' he began. 'Me an' Mist' Shelby had had dealin's for a good many years. I guess he'll tell you 'bout that when I git done.'

'Yes,' said Shelby huskily. 'I sure aim to.'

'Well, he got Mis' Mary Ruth to take me on as a overseer, but all the time I was workin' for him an' I told him anything he wanted to know. Y'see, I wasn't bothered an' then I didn't know what he had in his mind. Well, suh, Mis' Mary Ruth found that running a big place like that ain't so easy an' she naturally went to Mist' Shelby for help and he give it to her 'cause he knowed he'd git it back later on.

Well, fust one thing an' then another came up and Mis' Mary Ruth had to borrow money from Mist' Shelby 'cause she wasn't makin' both ends meet and she was powerful grateful to him for lettin' her have it. Which was what he was aimin' at, 'cause she didn't feel she could go nowhere else to sell her cotton. Now right there is where this thing started.'

'With the sale of the cotton?' asked Chamberlain.

'Yes, suh. Mist' Shelby bought all Mis' Mary Ruth's cotton last year an' graded it hisself. He graded it as lessen middlin' when I knowed an' he knowed that most of it was mighty nigh strick middlin'.'

He had their attention now. Mary Ruth looked at Shelby and remembered what Larry had told her. Her face hardened, not for herself, but for Larry.

'You mean he paid her for her cotton as low middlin' and sold it for strict middlin'?' asked Solicitor Chamberlain.

'Yes, suh. That's precisely what he done. I guess hit made a difference of two or three cents a pound an' while I ain't no hand to figger much, you can see that on a thousand bales of cotton that runs into money.'

'But I don't see what that has to do with ——'

'Yes, suh. I knows you don't, but you will in a minit. Mist' Shelby figgered he could do the same thing every year. Maybe not as raw as the first time, but still so's he'd git a right nice piece of change out of it. That's how come him to be so put out when Mis' Mary Ruth up an' leased the place to Cap'n

Maynard 'thout sayin' nothin' to him 'bout it. So he set out to run Mist' Maynard outa the county, but he had to wait till he could git the pisen workin' over the county 'cause folks was mighty took with Cap'n Larry at fust.'

There was a stir in the room and whispers ran around. Farley's words had the stamp of truth and even Shelby could perceive the danger in which he stood. He rose and spoke to the solicitor.

'I protest against any such proceedin's as this. I'm not charged with anything. I've a right to a lawyer and I want to get shet of these things.' He kicked his legs and the shackles clanked.

The solicitor looked into the future and trimmed his sails to the prevailing winds. 'This may be a bit irregular,' he said. 'But we'll hear the man's story.'

'Didn't seem like there was no way he could do nothin' to hurt Cap'n Larry,' Farley resumed. 'Mist' Shelby got outsmarted every time. Then Cap'n Larry heard about all that cotton that was low middlin' an' he begun to git suspicious an' tryin' to trace that cotton an' see what mill bought it an' what they paid for it. But he couldn't do that without gittin' the gin numbers of the cotton an' I had the record of them. I stole 'em down to Wilson's gin one time.'

'Why did you do that?'

Farley attempted no evasion. 'Me an' Mist' Shelby'd had our little differences an' I was kind of figgerin' on protectin' myself. Anyways, I had the figgers an' I was waitin' to see which way the cat

was goin' to jump when this here bisness come up 'bout the warehouse.'

'What did you have to do with that?'

'In one way I didn't have nothin' an' in another I had a right smart. Y'see, Mist' Shelby fust hired me to set fire to that warehouse.'

'You agreed to do it?'

'I told him I would, but I didn't have no idea of goin' through with it. Y'see, I had some little things I wanted to settle with him. I was figgerin' to jam him just's hard as I could with the gin records an' the fire, too.'

'You had a grudge against Mr. Shelby?'

'Yes, suh. But I guess I must of got too biggity 'cause Mr. Shelby come mighty nigh foolin' me. 'F I hadn't of stepped fast there ain't no tellin' what would of happened to me. But now — well, suh, it's sinful to be as well satisfied as I am right this very minute.'

'But get on with your story,' Chamberlain interrupted impatiently. 'What about the fire?'

'Yes, suh. I'm coming to that. Some of this I know. Some of it he told Grimes and Sellers.' He pointed to the stranger from Montgomery who sat limply in a chair. 'Here's what I know. Mist' Shelby hired me to set that fire. But I got suspicious an' I had these boys sort of watch his office the night of the fire. I was with 'em part of the time. When this man left it we follered him 'bout till it was time for me to git back to Mist' Shelby's office, an' they went on after him.'

'You went back to set the fire?'

'Aw, Mist' Chamberlain, I wasn't really goin' to set no fire. I was figgerin' on somethin' else. Oh, yes, there's somethin' else. 'Bout that milk can an' them pliers. I took 'em from out at the place an' give 'em to Mist' Shelby.'

Chamberlain nodded. 'I was going to ask you about that. Go on.'

'Well, suh, I told them boys — they's my cousins an' they've been workin' for Cap'n Larry out to the plantation an' he's treated 'em fine — I told them, boys, Monk and Randolph, to foller this feller an' if he done anythin' to grab him. They follered him down to the warehouse and seen him break in, and they was waitin' under the window when he come out. They thought he was gittin' somethin' out of the safe an' they grabbed him right then, figgerin' on waitin' for me. Then when the fire started, they knowed he'd done it an' when I didn't show up, they took him along with 'em to wait for me.'

'And where were you?'

'I was with Mist' Shelby.'

'What did he do?'

Farley's face flushed at the memory, but he still spoke with careful and complacent restraint. 'Fust thing when the fire broke out, he grabbed me by the throat. He wanted them gin numbers an' I lied an' tole him I didn't know nothin' 'bout 'em. He could of squeezed my gullet plumb out of me an' I wouldn't of told. Them figgers was my ace in the hole. Then when he loosened up so's I could talk, I started to

run. Then he hit me with somethin' an' when I woke up I was chained with them things he's got on his legs now up in the attic of his house.'

'And you've been there ever since?'

'Ever since. Yes, suh.'

Chamberlain summed up the situation. 'So that Grimes and Sellers were holding the man who fired the warehouse and Shelby was holding you and neither knew anything about the other.'

'Yes, suh. That's exactly like it was till Mis' Mary Ruth come out to his place this evenin' to try to git him to stop this here party you-all was figgerin' on havin'. Between us, we managed to git him down an' then we went an' got the boys an' this other feller and brung 'em in.'

Chamberlain looked at Shelby. 'What have you to say about this, Mr. Shelby?'

'Plenty,' growled Shelby. 'But this ain't the place to talk. I'll talk when I git good and ready.'

From outside in the corridor that was crowded with those unable to jam their way into the courtroom there was the sound of a cheer and subdued cries of congratulation. A lane opened in the crowd and down it walked Larry Maynard with Sylvester Burt's spare figure behind him.

Men in the courtroom did not cheer. They climbed upon the benches and beat their hands together until the noise was deafening. In the revulsion of feeling that had come with Farley's story, men leaned forward and clapped and clapped. Somehow, it was more impressive than the wildest yells.

Larry walked inside the railing and paused with one hand on Mary Ruth's shoulder. He ignored the din behind him, but waited until it had finished before he spoke. His tanned face had whitened in the jail confinement, and his cheeks were lean. Once his glance rested on Shelby and in his eyes was a look akin to that of Buck Farley.

When the clapping was done, Larry spoke clearly.

'Mr. Solicitor,' he said, 'I am here to answer any charges against me in a court of law.'

Chamberlain glanced about him and there was a hint of humor in his smile when he answered.

'Mr. Maynard, it seems that you have been tried in your temporary absence and found not guilty.'

At his words there was another outburst of applause.

But Larry did not heed. He was bending over Mary Ruth, one of her hands crushed in his.

CHAPTER XXX

FROM the Big House came the sound of light-hearted laughter that rang clearly across the bare fields whose winter drabness was now glorified into shining radiance by a blanket of snow that sparkled and glittered under a sun still half-hidden by scurrying gray clouds.

The flakes had come whispering down mysteriously in the night. When the little brown urchins in the quarters were put to bed they left fields that stretched black and garish under the cold radiance of a high riding moon. When they got up, it was to find their world transformed by this white magic.

For most of them it was their first snow and they dressed hurriedly and rushed out to roll and wallow in it and shout and rub each other's faces and come in at last to hold half-frozen fingers to the cheery blazes in the wide-throated chimneys.

Even the grizzled elders from their chimney corners looked on indulgently and administered only mild rebuke.

'You, Ca'line! You come in heah outa dat cold 'fore I picks up a stick of stove wood an' busts you wide open. You heah me, gal!'

From the store a bell began to clamor and there was a bustle in the quarters to answer the summons. Word of it had come down from the Big House the night before.

'Everybody come to the store Christmas morning when the bell rings.'

They knew what it meant. Over behind the Big House Uncle Simon Billups had been busy all night at a pit filled with live coals of white oak.

Spits had been laid across the pit and on these rested the massive quarters of a beef cow. She had been slaughtered the night before, dressed and then split neatly in half. Uncle Simon and his crew had been busy with mysterious rites ever since.

The quarters sniffed the breeze and smacked their lips in anticipation. Barbecue!

The quarters were merry that Christmas. Voices were lifted in snatches of chants. There was laughter and bits of talk; new clothes; dolls in the arms of children. Here and there a little black mite rolled along brave in the panoply of a cowboy or sporting the feathered headdress of an Indian. They were happy.

'Cap'n Larry done come back to the Big House for good. Yes, man! Him an' Mis' Mary Ruth . . . he! he! Ya-as, suh! Knowed it all the time. When you see a man cuttin' his eye 'roun' at a ooman like he done at Mis' Mary Ruth . . . M-m-m-. Shucks, man, look out! Gwine be a job for de preacher mighty soon!'

They hurried toward the store where they raised a shout at the sight of Larry Maynard standing on the porch. There was a stampede forward and a universal cry of 'Chris'mus gif', Cap'n! Chris'mus gif'!

Larry looked down on them and nodded and smiled and threw up a hand to still the clangor of the bell. 'You got me fair and square,' he acknowledged and there was a burst of laughter. 'Come on up closer and get it.'

There were murmurs of awe at what they saw. On the porch of the store stood opened barrels filled with oranges, nuts, apples, a huge case of red and white striped stick candy and a keg of raisins.

Beside each stood a grinning six-foot plough hand a-swell with importance at being chosen by the Cap'n for such a duty.

They had their orders and were generous. No one was stinted and there was provision for even the tiniest black mite sleeping in the arms of his mother and displayed pridefully to Larry.

'Gwine call him Mister Larry, Cap'n,' Larry was told. 'Yes, suh. Just dat. Mister Larry. Ain't 'at a fine name?'

'He'll be a big man like his father, Susan,' Larry told her. 'Thank you.'

Larry raised his voice. 'Dinner for everybody behind the Big House. You know where Uncle Simon is. Plenty to eat over there. Merry Christmas.'

There was a rush for home for it was near noon and no man, woman or child wanted to be last to be served by Uncle Simon and his crew. Left behind Larry moved swiftly.

'Put 'em inside, boys,' he said, 'and let's lock up. You can eat at the barbecue or up at the kitchen of the Big House.'

Locking up was a short horse soon curried, as one of the stable boys whispered with a laugh. Soon they scampered away with wide grins over their shoulders.

At the Big House Mary Ruth met him at the door. 'I was beginning to be afraid you'd be late,' she said. 'Hurry and get ready and come down. They are waiting for us in the parlor.'

Larry's heart beat faster as he bathed and dressed before the roaring fire that Uncle Mose had built in his room. Could it be true? Involuntarily his thoughts went back to the last Christmas Day that he had spent. What a difference a single year had made!

Downstairs in the parlor he found them waiting. Old Man Cade who had come down on certain urgent representations from Henry Grider, whose pink face beamed impartially on all in the little circle. Judge Fleetwood was there. And Reverend Willoughby Claypool, who had defied the county and visited Larry in jail. And the lean figure and dark face of Sylvester Burt. Mrs. Yates was tucked away in a corner and behind her chair was Aunt Martha Dawkins in snowy apron and turban, her black face ashine.

The room was a picture of scarlet and green. The negroes from the quarters had scoured the canebrakes for mistletoe and holly filled with clusters of red berries. At the east window a sort of bower had been made.

Mary Ruth entered with Larry and for a moment

there was an expectant silence broken by the sound of footsteps crunching in the snow of the walk.

'I'll see who it is,' volunteered Grider quickly. 'I'm nearest the door. Keep your seats, everybody.'

He went out and returned in a moment with a queer look on his face. 'They want to see you,' he told Larry.

'Who is it?' Larry was a little impatient at being interrupted. 'Oh, all right. Bring them in.'

He stiffened as he recognized the men who filed into the room behind Grider. His face grew hard and his eyes chilled.

'Good-morning, gentlemen,' he said courteously and waited.

Major Dave Wilmot scruffed his grizzled beard and bent his head. 'Good-mornin' to you all. I — I hadn't no idea we were intrudin' like this.'

'That's quite all right, sir. What did you wish?'

Major Wilmot seemed to have some trouble in beginning. He pulled at his beard and his eyes scanned Larry's face. 'Why, we came out here first to say we're sorry,' he said slowly. 'These others here asked me to come and do their talkin' for them, figurin' maybe you wouldn't feel so hard toward me. They — we've made fools of ourselves an' we wanted you to know how we felt.'

'That's kind of you, Major. But I really see no necessity for it. It's a little too late for that, isn't it?'

'That's what we hoped was not true. We've cleaned things up an' we know where we stand. We'd hate for you to feel hard toward us after what you

tried to do for us an' the return we made you. An' — an' it's Christmas.'

'I see,' said Larry.

Major Dave gazed at Larry keenly. 'I don't know's I blame you much,' he said regretfully. 'I'm free to admit that I didn't do you right an' it's eatin' on me. I don't like to think that of myself. An' these other gentlemen — Abner Beaumont an' Earl Fletcher an' Chris Rice, they feel the same. We're kind of committee from the county an' we hoped you'd be magnanimous.'

'You didn't come all the way out here merely to tell me that you're sorry,' said Larry.

'No-o, we didn't. I — I don't s'pose there's much use tellin' you why we did come. But I'm goin' to do it. We came out here to see if we couldn't persuade you to take charge of the Lebanon warehouse next year just like you did last. We're goin' to rebuild it.'

Larry spoke instantly. 'I'm afraid that I shall have to refuse, sir. You see, the position is more dangerous than I anticipated.'

The lines in Major Wilmot's face deepened. He looked around the circle of faces for sympathy and understanding. In none of them did he find any softness except in Mary Ruth's. He started to speak, but Larry interrupted him.

'You see, Major, you can't appreciate my feeling because you haven't been where I stood. Being put in jail for something I didn't do was bad enough. But I was taken out to be hung to the nearest tree by a

mob composed of the very men I was trying to help. If it had not been for Mr. Grider and Miss Yates I wouldn't be here. I don't care to take that risk again.'

Major Wilmot sighed and shook his head. 'I know,' he said a little wistfully. 'I keep forgettin' you ain't as old as I am an' ain't found out what a profitless thing it is to nurse a grudge. It's human to do it, I know. Took me the better part of sixty years to find out it didn't pay. Now, Larry, I ain't tryin' to over-persuade you. But there's some things you ought to know. You won't have no trouble again. You wouldn't of had this year if it hadn't ben for Evan Shelby. He ain't goin' to be with us any more. You know what's goin' to happen to him. Farley's testimony an' the supportin' evidence we've found since will send him to the penitentiary's soon as a jury can get his case. We've found out a lot about him since he was caught. He's to blame for the feelin' against you in this county. 'Course I ain't sayin' that we wasn't partly at fault, too, for believin' so easy. But he spread the poison. Next year we'll know better. I'm askin' you to do a pretty big thing, son. I'm askin' you to give us a second chance, not because we deserve it, but because we want it an' 'll know how to appreciate it next time.'

Larry hesitated and bit back the curt refusal that was on his tongue. Major Dave's words tugged at him. There was truth in what he said. . . .

Major Wilmot was speaking again . . . this time to Alex Cade, who had looked on in silence.

'You ain't got any objection to his runnin' the warehouse for us again, have you, Mr. Cade?'

'That's a matter for him to decide. We've agreed that he is to remain here permanently. I shall exercise my option on the Yates plantation and he will operate it with a proprietary interest. We will expand our operations as opportunity presents. But I see no reason why he should not manage your warehouse, too, if, as he says, it isn't too dangerous.'

Major Wilmot smiled quizzically. 'All of us make mistakes, Mr. Cade. Some of us admit it an' some of us never do. What I was tryin' to make clear to Larry was that we've learned our lesson. I doubt if Shelby has a dollar when he gets out of prison, for every man who lost cotton in the warehouse has entered suit against him for damage caused by the loss of the cotton. They're askin' both actual and punitive damages. How they'll come out I don't know, but Shelby'll never have no standin' in this county again. We've promised Farley to take care of him with the governor for a parole if he testifies right an' he's goin' to toe the mark. The man from Montgomery give us back the money Shelby paid him an' that's been traced to Shelby. There ain't a chance for him to come back. He's through. But in a way he was a leader in the county. He got things done. The county needs a more wholesome influence. Larry, son, it's a big chance for you if you can let bygones be bygones. Can't you, son, for us when we're sorry?'

Mary Ruth came up to Larry and put a hand on

his arm. 'Isn't that what you've been working for, dear?' she asked.

He looked down at her. 'You'd have me take it?'

'You've earned it. Let it all go, dear. Don't cloud your future with yesterdays that are gone.'

Henry Grider put in a word too. 'You've had all the best of it, son. You ain't goin' to quit just 'cause they wouldn't play like you wanted 'em to the first time?'

Larry straightened and his hands moved in an eloquent little gesture of surrender. Mary Ruth turned quickly to Major Dave.

'He'll take it, Major.'

'I cannot refuse, sir,' Larry agreed and put his lean fingers into Major Wilmot's outstretched hand.

Major Wilmot bent over Mary Ruth's fingers. 'The county is indebted to you,' he said. 'But he will not regret it. He belongs to Aarons County now.'

He and the men with him would have gone, but Larry stopped him. Having yielded, he did not do things by halves. He put out his hand and other members of the committee crowded about him. The last of Larry's bitterness was gone under the warmth of their words. Besides, who could harbor ill-feeling on Christmas Day and such a Christmas as this!

They would have gone, but Larry detained them. 'If you gentlemen will sit down. . . ' He looked around and then went to Mary Ruth.

'Are you ready?' he asked.

She put her hand on his arm. 'Yes,' she answered.

Reverend Claypool took his place before the bower of holly wreaths and mistletoe. Soberly Mary Ruth and Larry went to stand before him.

The room suddenly fell very silent. Into the silence the sonorous voice of the minister rose.

‘Dearly Beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God and in the face of this company to join together this man and this woman in the holy bonds of matrimony. . . .’

THE END

